

Operation Eradicate: Part Two

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete



Created by FicLab

www.ficlab.com

Operation Eradicate: Part Two

VraieEsprit

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.110 on December 8th, 2024, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/3760679/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by [VraieEsprit](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on September 1st, 2007, and was last updated on September 26th, 2007.

FicLab ID: _XeYakWr/m4g5xei5/10700E581

Table of Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Summary

title	Operation Eradicate: Part Two
author	VraieEsprit
source	https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3760679/
published	September 1st, 2007
updated	September 26th, 2007
words	119,934
chapters	18
status	Complete
rating	Fiction T
tags	Anime/Manga, Complete, Fanfiction, Fantasy, Fi, Sci, Tenchi Muyo

Description

Kiyone and co have discovered Nakabito's plot is more sinister than they anticipated, meanwhile Tenchi and Ryoko struggle against Earth's prejudice. And for Seiryō and his family, the net seems ever tighter as Elite Agents investigate Seiji's death...

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

Well, here it is. The official end of the ride.
sniff

It's sort of sad, somehow... LOL :)

This is the conclusion, I suppose. But in the way of life, not everything can be concluded in one nice neat little story and then tied up with a bow. So there will be a few leading questions left, probably, at the end of this tale. Of course, some things will be settled definitively. If my story follows the current plan, there will probably be at least one death in this part. There'll also be an element of betrayal between closely associated characters, a few dark flickers from Seiryō's past — and, ultimately — the future of the planet Earth hanging entirely in the balance.

Shall I say more?

Well, no. If I did, noone would read my story :P

Part One gave a hint into the life of Kiyone, or rather her background and past. It also did the same somewhat for Seiryō. The same is true of this part, I think. I've never seen Seiryō as a clearcut hero character, nor do I believe that — in my interpretation of him — he was always honourable or that he was even really a good guy before his encounter with Tokimi's magic. (After all, in GXP, he was set up as the villain!)

That's not to say he didn't always have the good stuff inside of him — I've always tried to emphasise that Tokimi didn't rewrite his personality, it just put him more in touch with the parts of his make-up that he'd suppressed in trying to be a son of the Tennan line. The legacy of the Tennan family is a heavy one of blood feud, ambition, pride and arrogance... and it's only now, thanks to Tokimi, and Kiyone, and Sasami and Suki that he's begun to take those traits in hand and balance them into becoming a decent member of the Juraian race.

That said, he has some fairly unpleasant behaviour in his past. It was mentioned in part one — and the opening of this story paints the picture even more clearly. (We'll see if people still love him quite as much after they've read this story... LOL. I still love him — but I like anti-heroes and villains better than clear cut heroes most of the time

anyway — they're far, far more interesting!!)

In the end, I think, Tokimi's pulling Seiryō into her scheme was a watershed for both of them. And Seiryō is able to be the man he is now because of how much he suffered then... in a sense, he's his own worst enemy and he's caused his own bad karma and pain more than anyone else ever has.

I wonder if this means I should give him a happy ending or his just desserts... ponders evilly

As for Tenchi and Ryoko, I'm expecting a bevy of hate-mail at somewhere around the mid-point of this story... smiles innocently

No, I promise, it's not that bad.

Probably.

Hehe :D

Anyhow, here is part two — the absolute end to the wild ride that's been my Tenchi fanfiction arc.

Usual legal regs apply... and thank you to everyone who's read over the past year!!

Synopsis

After the death of his mother, Seiryō has been forcibly withdrawn from Juraian politics as he struggles to come to terms with his loss. However, even as he prepares to bury the woman who gave him life, the political machinations of an old enemy are starting to wheel into play. Determined to protect her friend from more pain, Kiyone has sworn herself to his cause, but she begins to realise that this is a much bigger plot than at first anyone imagined.

The Earth's paranoid rampage against aliens is hotting up, causing tension as Tenchi and Ryoko find themselves caught in the middle. Washu deploys Yume's unique skills to find out more about Seguru Ishida and his motivation, but her involvement has unforeseen side effects as Tenchi realises that his family are spying on his friends behind his back.

And as the scale of Nakabito's scheme becomes clear, the Earth's alien fear seems to be more than justified. A devastating weapon has been unleashed against the planet Tenchi and Ryoko call their home — is there anything which can prevent the Earth's complete destruction?

OPERATION ERADICATE: PART TWO

A TenchiMuyoFanfiction

by

VRAIEESPRIT

Chapter One

The Galaxy Police Academy: Elite Division

Eleven Years Earlier

Well, another wasted morning.

Seiryō Tennen made his way slowly down the hallway from his morning class, his brows knitted together in displeasure as he headed back to his sleeping quarters. It had been six months since he had first arrived at the Galaxy Police Elite Training Program, and it had not improved on him over time. Surrounded by people of inferior birth and origin, and forced to learn things which no self-respecting Lord of Jurai would ever care about, he was both resentful and indignant that he, of all people, should have ended up in such a place.

He clenched his fists, anger flickering across his haughty teal eyes as he remembered his father's parting words to him.

"It will get you out of my hair and teach you something about being a proper man, rather than a nuisance always in my shadow." The cruel words echoed through his head for the thousandth time, sparking his hot temper yet again at the derision that had marked Lord Seiji's tones. "You don't understand what it means to be a Tennen yet, Seiryō — but I'll make you, dammit, or kill you in the attempt! You want to question me so badly? Then I won't have you under my roof until you've learnt that of all noble disciplines, family pride is the strongest!"

"I hate him." Seiryō muttered vehemently under his breath. "I hate him... I hate him! What kind of a man does he think he is, anyway? What kind of a role model? I will make him pay for this, I swear it. The indignity of sharing quarters with men of ignominious birth — of sharing classes, and being expected to socialise with them! Of all the hells in deep space he could have sent me, I swear he found the worst! I will never forgive him for this... not ever!"

"Hey, Tennen!"

Seiryō paused, turning on his heel as he heard the voice of his classmate calling him from the other end of the hallway. He frowned, his brow furrowing in irritation as he squared himself, gathering his normal demeanour of icy disdain as he met his companion's gaze with an impassive one of his own.

"Did you want something?" He asked quietly, injecting a note of faint boredom into his words. "I have got better things to do than talk to you, you know — this had better be important."

“Damn right it’s important.” His companion bristled at the dismissive nature of Seiryō’s manner, launching himself forwards as he made a wild lunge for his fellow student. “I want to know what you think you’re playing at with Yuriko, and I want the truth. Now.”

“Yuriko?” Seiryō eyed him for a moment, and the other man’s eyes narrowed to near slits.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I mean, you bastard!” he hissed. “Yuriko! Yuriko Kawazaki! My fiancée!”

“Oh. That Yuriko.” A cold, unpleasant smile twitched at the corners of Seiryō’s mouth at this. “I had forgotten... such things are not important to me.”

“Not important...?” The young man’s eyes opened wide with incredulation. “What the hell do you mean... that you just... what the hell did you do to her, Tennan! Answer me! **Answer me!**”

“As if such things were any of your business.” Seiryō snorted, darting out of the way of the young man’s grab as he did so. “I don’t waste my time over people who don’t matter to me, so leave me alone. If you’re so desperate to have Yuriko’s attentions, you’re welcome to her. I’ve explored that avenue and I’ve moved on. She’s all yours.”

He smirked.

“Although I can imagine that if she truly was your fiancée, she was desperate for some way out.” he reflected. “To marry the son of a known Kanemitsu dissident, whose father’s name isn’t even fully known... do you really think that this is my fault? More likely Yuriko — if that’s her name — saw me as her cry for help. You can’t blame the girl for having an element of taste. Even if she is only the daughter of a Seniwan physician, she’s still far too well-born for an illegitimate half-breed like yourself.”

“What did you call me?”

“What you are.” Seiryō said with a careless shrug. “There are social strata in this universe, Nakabito — whether they exist in this dive of a place or they don’t. And you can consider this a lesson in them — Yuriko was simply too good for you, and so she moved on. Such is life.”

“So you think you can take her over now? You can make her love you instead?” Nakabito demanded, and Seiryō snorted.

“You mistake me. I have no interest in pursuing anything, or in making her love me.” He said derisively. “You are a fool, sometimes... you let your heart run away with your head.”

“So you’ll discard her like a useless piece of rubbish?” The other youth’s

eyes widened with disbelief, and Seiryō stared, then let out a low chuckle.

"You are so melodramatic." He said coldly. "And so naive. Do you think that any connection formed in a place such as this one is going to last beyond a brief encounter? We're young men, and we're none of us within our normal social circles. See sense. Yuriko is a pretty wench, it's true. But she's just that — pretty. She has no noble connections, and it would be foolhardy of me to pursue it beyond that level. Your standards are far different from the ones I have to follow, Nakabito-san — not all of us can be quite so generous with our affections. I'm sure Yuriko knows this as well as I do... as I said, if you want her so much, she's all yours. Though if the rumours about your father are true, she may be glad of her escape."

"You stuck up creep, I'll rearrange your face for you!" The young man was incensed by this and he lunged once more, this time glancing a blow off the edge of Seiryō's cheek. "You steal the girl out from beneath my nose, you convince her she's in love with you and then you discard her as if she was nothing more to you than something to pass the time! I'm going to take you down a peg or seven, I swear I am — before we graduate from this place, I'm going to put you firmly in your place, SeiryōTennan!"

"I doubt that." Seiryō's eyes narrowed, a dangerous flicker entering his teal eyes as he flexed his own fingers. "My place, Junichi Nakabito, is as the blood heir of one of Jurai's most prestigious noble families. No matter how far you stretch that skinny arm of yours, you will never reach there."

"Shut your face or I'm going to do it for you!" Junichi balled his fists again, aiming square for Seiryō's nose, but his classmate reacted too quickly, grabbing him tightly around the wrist and pushing him away.

"Go away, Nakabito." He said coldly. "I don't fight with fists."

"Then it'll be easier for me to flatten you, won't it." Junichi's eyes narrowed to near slits and he jumped at Seiryō once more, pushing him up against the wall of the hallway as he finally made contact. "You only back away because you're a coward beneath all that stuck up noble rich boy talk. Everyone knows that you noble types have nothing but hot air beneath the skin... you're not a fighter, you're just a soft touch and a womaniser who's going to spend his time here debauching and skimming off classes because at the end of the day, you know that your Daddy can foot the bill for any excesses and bribe your way to getting your papers!"

*"**What** did you say?" Indignation flooded Seiryō's features at this, and Junichi smirked, tightening his grip.*

"Touched a sore point, did I?" He asked softly. "Well, Honoured Lord of Jurai — what are you going to do about it?"

“Get your filthy hands off me, you cretinous wretch.” Seiryō thrust his arms out, grabbing hold of Junichi’s shoulders and wrenching him forcibly away from his person. “You will not speak so about me and walk away from it, I guarantee it. You have no idea what I am capable of — you would do well not to offend the noble house of the planet Jurai so easily!”

“I’m not afraid of you and your tough talk!” Junichi righted himself, an edge to his tones as he squared his body once more. “You’re scum and you treat girls like Yuriko like they’re objects in your path. You’re giving me a damn good idea what you nobles are like, and that’s for sure. No wonder my mother wants Kanemitsu’s independence, when you’re an example of what Juraians are like! I stand by what I said. You may be rich, and you may think you can look down on all of the rest of us who will work and actually earn our qualifications. But I got news for you. You’re nothing special.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we.” Seiryō’s expression darkened, and he launched himself at the other man, striking hard and clean to Junichi’s cheek before he could react. Junichi struggled to land a punch of his own, but Seiryō was livid now, and he grabbed his companion by the arms, flinging him to the ground. His hand flickered to his belt, where his sword — normally no more than an affectation of status since his arrival at the Galaxy Police — hung silent, and as his fingers closed around the hilt, the blade flared into a hot white light.

“I am a Lord. I don’t fight with fists.” He repeated, his voice cold and dangerously low. “I was trained to fight with the lightsword, the chosen weapon of the noble houses of Jurai. And I got to be quite good at it, too.”

He stepped forward, placing one foot on his foe’s body to immobilise him as he placed the tip of the sword up towards the young man’s throat.

“You underestimate the fact that Jurai is a conquering planet, not one which sits in the shadows waiting to be assaulted.” He added softly. “And that my ancestors were at the pinnacle of the planet’s expansion. I am not a soft touch, Nakabito-san. And I will not be insulted by the likes of you. If Yuriko had the good sense to choose my company over yours, then that’s not my fault. She’s not a foolish girl — she knows what my obligations are, and she had no false expectations of my continued attention. If you are not such a man that you can’t satisfy a woman you consider yours, then you should take your frustration out on yourself and leave those of us better than you alone.”

“Go on. Kill me, then.” Junichi retorted. “If you’re so noble, slay your fellow student in cold blood. I dare you to. It’s just like a Juraian to destroy and maim out of arrogant pride.”

“I have no intention of killing a wretch like you.” Seiryō said scornfully, pulling back his blade and kicking his foot disparagingly against his fallen opponent’s body. “Your blood would taint a good weapon and I would not insult it with such a pointless act.”

Junichi cursed, scrambling to his feet as he prepared to make another assault on his classmate, but Seiryō had anticipated him and he drew his sword hand back, hitting the young man square on the nose with the hard carved hilt of his blade. Junichi let out a yell, clutching at his face as blood spurted from the wound, and Seiryō snorted.

“You have so much to learn about things.” He said coolly. “No matter how hard you try, you will never, ever equal me, Nakabito.”

“TennanNakabito!”

A voice from the corridor made Seiryō turn, sheathing his sword as he registered the presence of his tutor in the doorway of one of the training rooms. There was an unreadable expression on his face as he glanced between his two students, then he sighed.

“Nakabito, go clean yourself up.” He said quietly. “When you’re done, I’ll see you in my office. Tennan, you’ll come with me now... I want a word with both of you, and not at the same time.”

Seiryō looked mutinous, and for a moment he debated refusing the order, but something in the man’s blue eyes persuaded him that this wouldn’t be a good course of action so he bowed his head in acknowledgement, following the fair haired tutor along the hallway towards the chamber at the furthest end in silence. Once inside, however, the older man turned on his student, eying him thoughtfully.

“Your behaviour does not befit a noble son of the planet Jurai on occasion, Seiryō.” He said quietly. Seiryō started, staring at him in surprise, and the man nodded.

“You are a long way from home here.” He added. “And there’s a considerable amount of freedom when you’re young and without parental restraint. But whatever is common practice on your homeworld, you must remember that there are rules and regulations here at the Academy which must be obeyed. It’s your decision, but you know that the board of commanders might decide to send you home, if you choose to break them too often. And even though I have a feeling you might relish that idea, in practice I’m sure you realise what a disgrace it would be to your family, to have a son sent away from the Galaxy Police Elite Program.”

Seiryō pursed his lips, and for a moment he didn’t speak. Then he frowned.

"I was being baited by that heathen boy, Kuramitsu-sensei." He said quietly. "He began the confrontation. Not I."

"I know." Mitsuru Kuramitsu inclined his head slightly. "I observed the entire conflict, and heard everything that was said between you."

Despite himself, Seiryō was discomfited by this, and at his sudden hesitation, his tutor smiled, sinking down in his chair and indicating for his companion to do the same. Seiryō did so hesitantly, wariness in his teal eyes as he wondered what was about to happen to him.

"You are not a stupid young man, you know that." Mitsuru continued evenly. "In fact, maybe you are too aware of your abilities. But you have shortcomings also, and temper is proving to be one of them. This isn't the first time you've allowed yourself to be goaded into conflict with your fellow students, and it must stop."

"I cannot take insults to my family, Lord Kuramitsu." Seiryō said flatly. "And if you overheard our conversation, you know what things were said."

"Yes, I know." Mitsuru nodded his head. "But you gain no honour by acting in the way you just did."

He smiled.

"In a way, you and I have things in common." He added. "I am the eldest son of a noble family positioned just as yours are, at the pinnacle of Seniwan government, just like the Tennans are on Jurai. I know your family's name of old — I realise that you have a long-standing tradition and reputation to uphold. Your father's decision to send you here is all a part of that reputation, I imagine — to improve and hone the potential you have, so that one day you will inherit your family's title in a strong position."

Seiryō's lips thinned at the mention of his father, and Mitsuru's eyes became grave.

"I don't know the true reasons why you came here." He said simply. "And I know it wasn't your choice — even if you don't say as much, it's evident in your general attitude. But really, Seiryō, I think this is the best place for you to be. One day you will be a Lord of Jurai, that's beyond dispute. You have all the genetic connections to be a powerful force on your home planet and I've no doubt that you have the ambition in you to do those things. But while you are here, it would be pleasant to see that ambition directed towards other ends. Not fighting fellow students over assignments with female classmates. You are, I'm sure, better bred than that."

Seiryō faltered, consternation in his teal eyes as for a moment he

remembered the last terrible argument he and his father had had before he had boarded the shuttle-craft for the Galaxy Police Academy. Brief memories of his father's illicit assignations with young women behind his mother's back taunted his senses and he frowned, forcing them away. Mitsuru tilted his head on one side, eying him keenly, and he forced his composure back together, shrugging his shoulders.

"I am as you say." He said coolly. "A noble son of Jurai, and heir to my family's title and estate."

"Mm." Mitsuru paused for a moment, then, "But is that all you are, Seiryō?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Are you just an heir? Or are you more than that? Are you a man in your own right, also?"

"I..."

"Yes, I know. You did not expect this when I called you in here." Mitsuru nodded his head. "You expected a scolding, a fine for breaking rules, perhaps some other sentence. You may yet get all of those. But somehow I don't think that yelling at you is going to make a lot of difference. You consider yourself a cut above your fellows and in bloodline, perhaps, you are correct. Yet, in terms of achievement... I'm not sure. You are capable of it, that I don't doubt. But your application to your studies... you do not give a positive view to others of what noble sons are capable of, when they are sent to join the Galaxy Police."

"I don't understand."

"Then let me spell it out for you." Mitsuru rested his elbows on the table, offering his companion a smile. "You show great potential, Seiryō. Certainly in encryption, if you would put your mind to it, your natural linguistic tendencies and your superior education make you an obvious choice for me to tutor further, if you would only put your mind to improving your accuracy. You carry that blade at your waist, and you are an adequate swordsman, yet if you were to put your full focus into your training you could easily best any one of your fellow classmates."

He sighed.

"In short, you show the most natural potential that I've seen in a long time for a student in the Elite Corps." He said frankly. "What will make the difference between you being the best and simply having the possibility of it is down to you. This isn't Jurai, sure enough. There is no noble house of Tennan here. And yet, you could be so much more than you are now. Which would make your family back home more proud, Seiryō? You

graduating here with the highest marks and becoming celebrated in the division — or being returned home with your honour tarnished by impetuous, impulsive loss of temper?”

For once, Seiryō found himself unable to answer, and at the sight of his companion’s speechlessness, Mitsuru laughed.

“It is hard for all young lords to be to make the transition from pampered position to steely warrior.” He said wisely. “But with the right dedication, it can be done. You may think your family has done you no favours, sending you here. I won’t pretend to know for sure. But you aren’t helping your own cause, acting the way you are. I don’t say you must befriend your classmates, or even like them, if you don’t want to. But don’t sell yourself short. You have far too much ability to waste it, simply because you can’t see past the title you will one day inherit. In the future, when your parents are no longer there to hold sway over the Tennan name, I’m sure the Juraian Emperor or whoever rules your world will then need strength and diligence among his noble body. What better way, then, to prove your worth than by working your hardest here? You have the opportunity to outclass your fellows on Jurai — the opportunity to make yourself one day indispensable to your Council and your King, with the things you learn here. It’s just up to you whether you want to be the kind of Lord that Nakabito accused you of being, or one who’s strength and determination can truly uphold the Tennan family name with pride.”

Seiryō frowned for a moment, digesting this. Then he raised his gaze to his companion’s, new respect burning in his malachite gaze.

“I think I follow your reasoning.” He admitted. “And I... I’m sorry for my conduct today, Kuramitsu-sensei. I had not seen things in those terms before... but perhaps... perhaps you are right.”

“I’ve seen a lot of students, in the time I’ve spent flitting in and out of this place.” Mitsuru said evenly. “But there are very few who stand out beyond the others. The quality of our people is always high, Seiryō... the Elite training program is not for any other than the very best, after all. But I have to say, in you, I see something I don’t often see. And if you waste that, you will be the fool.”

Seiryō glanced at his hands, thinking this over.

“I had not envisaged the Galaxy Police as a part of my life, until Father decided I should come.” He said at length. “But it doesn’t matter where I am, not really. I will still be the heir of the Tennan estate, regardless of where I train to be so. And I will be the best I can be, you have my word on that. Tennan pride does not allow for less. I have become distracted — that’s all. But I won’t let it happen again.”

He made up his mind, raising a resolute gaze to meet his companion's.

"And I would like very much to persevere with encryption, if you would choose to teach me." He added hesitantly. "I... I find I enjoy it more than many of the other things we are forced to learn."

"Then I shall put your name down right now, in readiness." Mitsuru promised. "But I want no more fighting with Nakabito or any of your other fellow students. Even if you do not like them, or agree with them, you must respect them. Hard as it might be for you to accept, here you and they exist as equals... and you must keep it in mind. Take it as another necessary lesson towards becoming the Lord you must one day be, if you like... but take note of it all the same. This time I have taken you in hand myself, and I will not report the incident to anyone else, so long as you pay the requisite fine and observe the curfew rule about fighting for the next two weeks. But it is the last time I can make such a concession. If I didn't have such faith in you and the Elite you will become, Seiryō, I wouldn't do it now — but this is truly your last chance. You must control your temper... more than any other lesson, you must learn not to flare up and threaten the lives of your fellows. Even if you do not intend to hurt them, raising a blade to a fellow student's throat is an expellable offence. Remember that."

Seiryō frowned, then, slowly, he nodded.

"I shall pay the fine, and I appreciate your leniency, sensei." he said gravely. He paused, then slid his hand around the hilt of his sword, pulling it from his belt and laying it down on the desk. "And I would leave this with you, if you would take care of it for me. The rule of Jurai is that a swordsman must earn his blade. Father sent me here with it, and I have refused to relinquish it until now... even the rules of the Galaxy Police cannot intervene with the cultural laws of a planet such as my own. But I am not ready to wield this yet, so much is clear. I must prove myself as a man of my own making, not of my father's."

Mitsuru's eyes lit up with surprise, and then warmth as he took the carved hilt, nodding his head.

"I will." He said gently. "And I respect your decision. Seiryō, I think I've made the right call, in judging you this way. I'm sure that it won't be long before you can and will wield this blade as a true swordsman."

"Yes. But not against my fellows." Seiryō said grimly. "I will **not** be sent away from here in disgrace. You have my word on that, sensei. We will not need to have this conversation again."

"Then you may go, and pay your fine." Mitsuru responded with a grin. "I won't be naive enough to expect you and Nakabito to apologise to one another, but you may want to steer clear of him for a while. I will

emphasise the same things with him about fighting and the need for mutual student respect, so I'm sure that such an incident won't occur between the two of you again."

"Yes, sensei." Seiryō bowed his head, then withdrew from the room, closing the door slowly behind him. As he turned to make his way back towards his sleeping quarters, he passed the still fuming Junichi, his nose red and swollen, but he turned his back, quickening his pace as he made his way resolutely back towards the residential area.

"Sensei is right." He muttered. "I am not my father's puppet here, and more, it would spite him beyond all belief if I turned out to be good at this hell he's sent me to endure. If I made the most of it, and learnt skills he never did, I would one day be better than he's ever been. And I will not be sent away in disgrace. I will not give Father the excuse he needs to disown me! I will be the best Elite there ever was... and then Father will regret ever sending me away from home!"

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

For a moment, there was silence, as Ryoko and Sakura felt the crowd of people swelling and pressing in towards them, each one straining to catch a glimpse of the fallen young man. Despite her convictions, Ryoko found herself hesitating, backing up against the wall as she realised teleporting out of danger would likely compound her apparent guilt rather than clear her name, and as she glanced at Sakura, she muttered an inward curse. Her friend had crouched at the unconscious man's side, fear flickering in her dark eyes as she too registered the risk around them.

"Something's going on and I don't like it." The pirate muttered. "Like someone's trying to draw attention to me!"

"Excuse me... can I come through, please?"

At that moment, a fresh voice broke through the mass of people and as Ryoko glanced up, startled, she saw a young woman push her way through the bodies, holding up her hands as she cast apologetic glances and smiles at the surrounding onlookers.

"I'm a doctor." She said pragmatically. "Maybe I can help."

Ryoko stared at the woman, and her eyes widened, but at that moment she met the girl's dark aqua gaze with her own and any words she had been on the verge of speaking died in her throat.

"That woman did something to him! Be careful!" One man in the crowd flung a hand out in Ryoko's direction, and the self-proclaimed doctor glanced up at him, shaking her head.

"No, it wasn't this young lady." She said calmly. "It was a young man, I saw him quite clearly as he fled into the alleyways. Unfortunately I didn't manage to see where he went — but he had some kind of a weapon and I very clearly saw him take aim and fire."

She offered Ryoko a smile.

"I'm sure this lady was just trying to help." She added evenly. "But he's just stunned — I don't think he's hurt. Some teenagers these days will mess around with all kinds of stupid things thinking they're toys — but I don't think he'll take any permanent harm. Fortunately whatever shot him doesn't seem to have been a proper gun or to have

had live ammunition... he's just knocked out cold."

At the girl's calm, authoritative words, the crowd's intent attention on Ryoko and Sakura seemed to dissipate somewhat, and Ryoko stared in disbelief as the dark haired young newcomer brushed her hand gently against Kenichi's throat.

"He has a good pulse." She said evenly. "But crowding him like this isn't good. Please, can I ask everyone to step away from this place? I'm going to call my colleagues at the hospital — but he needs some air, and there's nothing to see here. The perpetrator got away — and like I said, it looked like a game of teenagers and stun guns to me."

Little by little, the crowd of people trickled away, reassured by the doctor's brisk words, and soon Ryoko found that she and Sakura were left alone with the unconscious Kenichi and his enigmatic rescuer.

"So, a man shot him?" Sakura bit her lip. "You... saw that?"

"I did." The young doctor nodded her head. She gazed at Ryoko, offering her a smile. "Fortunately for you, Washu wanted me to keep track of Kenichi Ishida... otherwise you might've been in more trouble than you were. Confronting him so blatantly wasn't a good idea, Ryoko — you should have known better."

"Wait... Ryoko... you *know* this girl?" Sakura looked confused, and slowly Ryoko gathered her wits, nodding her head.

"Yume." She said softly.

"Yume?" Sakura's eyes widened as she gazed at the young doctor, seeing her clearly for the first time. "But you..."

"I don't look like the Yume you've met." Yume shook her head. "This is a guise I use sometimes — albeit usually out in space. However, I didn't want anyone to make the connection between the Masaki's housekeeper and this incident — it would have looked bad, if someone had known who I really was. Especially if this has any connection to Tokimi and Dr Clay... because obviously, I have those connections too."

She got to her feet, dusting down her skirt as she cast Ryoko a smile.

"I should get out of here, if I were you. Go back to the mountains and speak to Washu." She suggested. "I'll take care of him... it's my brief to, anyway."

"I didn't realise you were involved in Washu's surveillance too." Ryoko admitted, returning the smile with a relieved grin of her own.

“Although it was slow of me — I should have known. What better spy than a shape-shifting droid to have on your team? Thank you, Yume... you saved my skin this time.”

“Did you really see the guy who did this?” Sakura wondered. Yume nodded her head.

“I did.” She said grimly. “And I’ve archived the file in my databanks for Washu to analyse later. I don’t know his face, and I’ve not been able to cross-reference the likeness with any person I’ve ever encountered before... at least, as far as I can tell. This being the case, it’s going to warrant further investigation.”

“You... sound totally not like a housekeeper at the moment.” Sakura reflected, and Yume offered her a rueful smile.

“I was not designed to be a housekeeper, although I was programmed with domestic capabilities.” She said softly. “I was designed to conceal, to spy and to gather information for a man named Dr Clay, who has since passed away. This likeness...”

She frowned, then shrugged.

“The likeness is of a woman named Manami Kurashida.” She admitted. “She died at Clay’s hands, but because I impersonated her then, I can do so at will to absolute genetic perfection. And in this instance... it seemed the appropriate thing to do. Noone on the Earth will know who Manami Kurashida is, after all. She has no ties here — or anywhere, anymore. And if I modify her features a little, noone will make the link at all. I think it would be beneficial... if Manami was Tenchi’s age for this operation. Don’t you?”

She glanced at her hands, as her features morphed and shifted into a girl of perhaps ten physical years younger, and she nodded.

“That should do it.” She added. “What better person for Kenichi to trust than someone his own age?”

Kenichi let out a faint murmur at this point, and Yume frowned.

“Ryoko, you should take Sakura and leave.” She said frankly. “Before he wakes and sees you here. I don’t want him to associate you with me — Washu said to get his trust, if I could — and I won’t manage that so long as you’re in the vicinity.”

“Sure, but you’ve got some explaining to do.” Ryoko warned. “When you get back to the mountains.”

“Ask Washu to fill you in.” Yume said with a grin. “It was her idea, after all. Not mine. Now go — otherwise it will all have been a waste

of time.”

Ryoko bit her lip, then she nodded. Grasping Sakura by the shoulder once more, she glanced around her, then focused her energy on the Masaki shrine, hazing back into view on the sloped roof as she let out a sigh.

“Ryoko, what the hell are you trying to do — kill me?” Sakura’s exclamation made her start and she frowned, casting her companion a look of confusion.

“Huh?”

“Did you not notice that we’re on the roof?”

“Oh.” Ryoko glanced down at the ground, then back at her friend, offering her a rueful smile. “Sorry. I forgot I wasn’t flying solo — Tenchi always complains when I teleport him to places like this, too. My bad... one second.”

She gripped Sakura more firmly, launching them both off the weather-worn tiles and down onto the grass below, where Sakura hurriedly pulled out of her companion’s grasp, putting a hand to her head.

“Just for the record, shrine climbing isn’t one of my hobbies.” She said firmly. “Next time you want to take me somewhere, at least think about where you’re landing, okay?”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I was just... my mind was on what Yume said.” Ryoko admitted. “Maybe I should have taken you home first — but this is sort of instinctive, coming here. I did it without thinking about it — and I want to talk to Washu, anyway.”

“Since I’m here, I’ll come too.” Sakura decided. “My head needs to settle a bit before you take me back to Osaka. Which you’ll have to do, by the way, because I don’t have enough cash in my purse to pay for even a single ticket back on the train.”

“Promise.” Ryoko nodded. “I wonder if Tenchi’s back yet... guess we’ll find out soon enough. Come on.”

“The mountains are really pretty in the Spring.” Sakura reflected, as they walked along the pathway that connected the Masaki shrine with the family’s home. She glanced up at the trees, and Ryoko followed her gaze, a smile touching her lips as she held out her fingers to catch the drifting pink petals.

“Sakura, just like your name.” She said frankly. “But you’re right. It’s my favourite time to be in the mountains. Cherry blossom is so

beautiful — and besides, it's a memory, too."

"A memory?" Sakura looked startled, and Ryoko nodded.

"The first time Tenchi and I were separated, I wasn't sure I'd ever see him again." She admitted. "Things happened — I took a serious injury, and he... he went to Jurai, to fight against my father and break his hold over the universe. For a while, I thought I might even die... or even when I knew I wouldn't, I couldn't be sure that he'd want to see me again. But then I heard that he'd left Jurai — he'd come home to the mountains. And so... so I did too. Ryo Ohki and I set down here..."

She smiled, a look of nostalgia glittering in her amber eyes.

"It was a day just like this." She murmured softly. "Sakura everywhere. I know that in Japan, it's symbolic of a new beginning, isn't it? That's just how it felt, too. That's why I want to be married here, in the Spring, Sakura. Because the cherry blossom reminds me of that... and because in a way, it is a new beginning. The beginning of my official, firm life on the planet Earth. I've already put down roots, but marrying Tenchi will consolidate them. Being here... I'll finally belong for real."

She bit her lip.

"Providing idiots like that Ishida boy and Kane Kyoda don't interfere." She added pensively.

"Don't worry. I doubt Tenchi will let Kyoda sway him on that topic, even if they are friendly again." Sakura assured her. "And as for Kenichi Ishida... I don't really understand what the hell went on this morning, but if Washu-san and Yume are on the case... things will be all right, right? Washu-san is really smart... we both know that."

"She is." Ryoko acknowledged ruefully. "Sometimes too smart. But in this instance... I'm glad of it. Because I obviously can't do a single thing about anything at the moment, not if I'm really under so much scrutiny that some random idiot is tracking me around town."

She slid her hand into her pocket, removing the stun dart and glancing at it once more.

"And that a Galaxy Police officer shot him... that's weird, too." She added. "There's no reason for the Police to be here in my defence... it was more like..."

"Like someone shut him up before he could tell you anything they didn't want you to know." Sakura said quietly. Ryoko stared at her,

and Sakura shrugged.

“He mentioned the Galaxy Police, then someone shot him and shut him up.” She said evenly. “And you say it was a Galaxy Police officer who did it, because that’s Galaxy Police ammunition. Right?”

“Yes.” Ryoko’s hand closed around the dart as she registered the truth in her friend’s words. “Although it wouldn’t be obvious to everyone that it was — I was just used to having this kind of thing fired at me on a regular basis in my past life. You’re probably right. We’ll mention that to Washu, too — I wonder if she’s found anything new. She must have, if she’s sent Yume out to track this guy I’ve never even heard of.”

Sakura shivered.

“It’s sort of creepy, this stuff happening on the Earth.” She admitted. “Bad enough it happened when we were out in space — but it’s like the enemy’s come to roost here and by that I don’t mean you or Washu-san, Ryoko. It’s... it’s a different kind of enemy. Like... I don’t know. Paranoia, maybe. The way those people turned on you so quickly... and the way Ishida-kun spoke to you, too. I’ve not heard anyone be like that since the Earth first became aware of Jurai and the other planets like it. It’s not nice.”

“It’s just another chapter in a long lifetime of being pursued for me.” Ryoko grimaced. “It sucks, to be honest with you. Now, at last, I’ve a clean slate. I’m not on the run, I don’t have to hide. And I’ve not done anything to hurt the Earth since I’ve been here — unless you count the odd accidental explosion here and there. It’s not fair... and I daren’t go to Earth’s governing people to complain in case they’re in on all of this. It stinks.”

“And it’s going to get progressively stinkier, of that I have no doubt.”

Washu materialised on the pathway in front of them at that point, making both girls jump and Ryoko curse as she narrowly missed the low-hanging branch of a nearby tree. “Ryoko-chan, your language is disgraceful — and this is a Shrine walkway, you know — aren’t you even a bit ashamed?”

“So I’m on edge. Shut up and tell me what’s going on.” Ryoko said impatiently, folding her arms across her chest. “Clearly you came out of your little rabbit hole for a reason, so clearly you’re waiting for someone. Is it me or is it Yume...? Spit it out and do it quickly... if you’ve found something out, I want to know what it is.”

“Am I to gather something happened in Osaka this morning?” Washu’s glance flitted between the two girls, and Sakura nodded.

“It was all very strange, really.” She admitted. “I... it happened to quickly to really know what it was. One moment Ryoko and I were just walking down the street, the next she was confronting someone about following her and the next...”

“He was laid out on the ground unconscious.” Ryoko said grimly. “It had nothing to do with me, Washu, I swear — I’m not so careless as to blast an idiot in full view of the public. But that seemed to be the intention — to make it look like something I did.”

“Fortunately Yume was there and she intervened... she convinced the crowd it wasn’t Ryoko.” Sakura bit her lip. “Washu-san, is Ryoko in danger? And Tenchi, too?”

“Possibly.” Washu sighed. “Maybe you’d better both come to the lab with me. No doubt, if Yume has been carrying out her task as diligently as she usually does, she’ll have a good lock on the person who was following you... and I can take her report later. But there are things I think you need to know, musume-chan. Beginning with the fact that your paranoia is definitely not unjustified. In fact, if nothing else, I think maybe it’s understated.”

“I’m realising that, too.” Ryoko held out her hand, and Washu scooped up the stun dart, staring at it in surprise.

“Galaxy Police.” She murmured. Ryoko nodded.

“I had enough of these babies shot my way over the years — I’d know them anywhere.” She agreed. “Sakura thinks that someone didn’t want this Ishida kid stalker to tell me too much about what he was up to, so he shot him and knocked him out. Frame me and prevent a leak at the same time — effective strategy.”

“Ishida.” Washu’s brows knitted together. “Mm. Then that explains why Yume was on the scene.”

At that moment they reached the lab and Washu pushed open the door, ushering her two companions inside as she flicked on the overhead lights, moving towards one of the many buzzing computer consoles as she keyed in a set of digits. An image flashed up on the screen, and Washu perched herself on a stool, crossing her legs as she flicked a hand in the picture’s direction.

“Seguru Ishida.” She said frankly. “Currently one of Japan’s most successful businessmen, and a man whose company, Kouken Industries have recently secured a major intergalactic business contract — he’s

one of the first to take steps into the intergalactic market, in fact.”

“Seguru... *Ishida*?” Ryoko’s eyes narrowed. “That’s too good to be a coincidence.”

“Ishida-san is one of the investors in the Earth’s space defence program — his money has helped fund the work I’ve been involved in since I made myself known to the International Space Consortium and offered them my skills.” Washu reached across to click a button, and the image changed to a diagram of the Earth’s upper atmosphere. “I never paid him any more attention than any of the other investors, until my trip to Tokyo. Then he came to my office, to discuss with me the potential risks posed by a planet such as Jurai. He seemed to know an awful lot about Seiryō Tennan, Kihaku and you, Ryoko. It attracted my interest, so I did some digging.”

She gestured at the screen once more.

“This is the original proposal I laid out for defence of the Earth’s atmosphere.” She said casually. “The coordinates were specially calculated in order that in a time of attack, the maximum amount of protection would be afforded, by means of...”

“Get to the point... we don’t need a physics lesson.” Ryoko interrupted. “So you doodled this on your computer and they all fell in love with it, right? What about it?”

“When I went to check the work done so far, the coordinates had been changed.” Washu shot Ryoko a cross look, running her fingers over the keys as the image shifted once more. “It might not look a major deal on the big screen like this — but a change of this nature is potentially lethal for the Earth. Instead of deflecting enemy attacks — the shields in these positions would send them right down onto the Earth’s surface.”

“What?” Sakura’s eyes opened wide with horror. “You think someone is... planning on...”

“Right now, I don’t know.” Washu admitted. “But I have two possible scenarios in mind. Number one, Ishida-san found out about this and became alarmed by the changes and the risk from outside. But then, I wonder, with an average Earth education and no access to the data files — how could he possibly have understood the implications? So then we have option number two. Someone has been tampering with the instructions and the planned work to achieve this result... and that someone has also been putting the fear of God into men with influence like our friend Seguru Ishida.”

“And his son, Kenichi.” Sakura breathed.

“That was the next port of call.” Washu nodded. “Since I was able to eliminate the fact that it was intended to frame me — my original reports are untouched, so whatever is going on, I’m seen as friend not foe. It’s more specific than just a hate against aliens crusade, although there’s no doubt in my mind that whatever force is behind this is exploiting the Earth’s naivety and natural fear of the unknown. Someone has a very particular agenda in mind. It’s not all aliens — Ryoko, I’m not even sure that it’s you, not truly. You’re a likely character — a figurehead for panic to the average uneducated Earthling. But it’s a smokescreen — a ruse to cover up the real threat and the real objective.”

“Which is?” Ryoko demanded.

“Best guess, it has something to do with Jurai.” Washu said with a shrug. She glanced at the dart, then, “And, clearly, the Galaxy Police.”

She sighed, setting it down on the unit.

“Tracking who fired it won’t be easy, either.” She reflected. “I’ve had Yume tracking Ishida’s son Kenichi in the hope of gaining his trust — I didn’t know whether the boy was or wasn’t involved but when I discovered that he was a recent graduate at Tenchi’s university, I wondered if he had any other connections, or if it was a coincidence. I’m still unsure, to be honest, whether his proximity to Tenchi has been entirely accidental. However, he is — or was — a close friend of Kane Kyoda.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Sakura nodded. “I only know Kenichi because Tenchi, Ikeda and I used to spend a lot of time around Kane.”

“You seem to have learnt a lot, then.” Ryoko observed, and Washu nodded.

“Needs must, as they say.” She agreed. “But finding information on the Earth isn’t as difficult as breaking into a superior system like Jurai’s or Seniwa’s secure network. I’ve been hacking old school records — and I figured he was a likely target for Yume’s feminine wiles.”

“For Yume’s *what*?” Ryoko eyed her suspiciously. “Washu, you didn’t just whore Yume out to some unsuspecting university grad, did you?”

“Well, I trust it’s not going to go that far.” Washu shrugged her shoulders dismissively. “You have a smutty mind, musume-chan. But I did tell her it wouldn’t hurt her to use her charms on him. She’s done

it before, after all — you might see her as some sterilised robot who cooks and cleans and flits around doing my dirty work. But Yume is a very sophisticated piece of technology. She's capable of a lot more things than you realise."

Ryoko's eyes narrowed.

"Yume's not just a damn robot now, though. Since she broke her programming, she's not just an object. Even *I* can accept that." She said frankly. "You shouldn't treat her like a slave, Washu. It isn't fair."

"Well, Yume was quite happy to oblige." Washu grinned. "Since she knows Tenchi might be in danger if this goes on."

"Tenchi." Ryoko sighed. "I might've known... you strike a low blow, you know. She's still got her disk drives in a ditz over him and we both know it — you shouldn't take advantage. Besides, if she's in Osaka pandering to some rich kid with an attitude, who's cooking dinner tonight?"

Washu chuckled.

"There we have the truth of it." She said, amused. "I thought it was too good to be true, you speaking up for Yume's human rights."

"Well, I still think it's sick." Ryoko pulled a face.

"Joking aside, Ryoko, Yume is better equipped to spy than any of us." Washu said with a shrug. "Her shape-shifting technology allows her to do things you and I can't do — and we can't really risk upsetting our positions, now we know that we're both, in some way, involved. Yume will discover what we need to know... and then she'll report back. No harm will befall her, I'm sure of that. She's a clever girl — and I trust her."

"I guess I do too." Ryoko acknowledged with a sigh. "All right. Whatever. We'll wait for her to see what she can find out. Is there nothing we can do, though, in the meantime? This Seguru Ishida is a bigwig, right... surely if he had connections to the Galaxy Police, we can suss them out?"

"I'll try." Washu nodded her head. "But that'll probably be more difficult. Earth might be indiscreet, but I doubt an Agent of the law would be."

"An Agent? An Elite?" Ryoko raised an eyebrow, and Washu nodded.

"To have the kind of connections to meddle in my instructions without causing trouble or alarm — yes. I think so." She agreed

grimly. “And one who can cover his tracks, no doubt.”

“Maybe not.” Sakura’s eyes narrowed, and Ryoko shot her a surprised look.

“Kura?”

“Well, it was just something Yume said.” Sakura shrugged. “Didn’t she say she’d seen this guy? And archived it, in her memory?”

“She did.” Ryoko’s eyes widened, and a smile crossed her lips. “Gee, now I guess I see why you beat Tenchi to finish top of the class. I clean forgot about it, in the chaos of getting back here!”

“But if Yume really *did* see the shooter, we probably have a digital likeness.” Hope flickered in Washu’s eyes. “In which case, we really will need to wait for her to come back. But when she does, we can probably begin to act, Ryoko... and hopefully, stem this before it has a chance to become any more sinister than it already is.”

“So things are progressing?”

Nakabito glanced up at the flickering screen in front of him, nodding his head as he offered his contact a fleeting, brief smile.

“As I said they would.” he said evenly. “The Earth are very easy to manipulate once you’ve gained their trust. Everything this end is going according to plan. There’s an undercurrent of panic already within this planet — and I’m just doing the best that I can to ensure it keeps up. That’s all.”

“Well, that’s something, at least.” The contact paused, then, “You know that our man on Jurai is a dead lead now?”

“I heard the reports, yes.” Nakabito’s expression became grave. “Another martyr to Kanemitsu’s cause... at Jurai’s hands.”

“Indeed. We need to move quickly. I don’t know what they may already suspect.”

“Our agent would not have talked.” Nakabito said evenly. “Believe me — those kind of people are ones who’ll complete their mission or die in the attempt. Betrayal sits badly with them — he simply took evasive action to prevent Juraian interrogation. They won’t find anything amiss in a Kanemitsu rebel causing trouble — it’s practically a given that there are extremists who sympathise with the fight for independance. All that’s different this time is that they’re being a little more coordinated.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“Mother would be proud of us, don’t you think?” He murmured, and the other man laughed.

“More than.” He agreed softly. “But listen, Junichi. Earth is a primitive planet. Even if your father did come from there — and you know that Mother never did confirm it for sure that it was the Earth — just that he’d been picked up in the vicinity in technological distress by a passing envoy ship. But you’re still half alien to those people — if you hype their insecurities too much they may turn on you too — and at the moment, we need them. They’re at the centre of all of this — we can’t afford to lose their cooperation at this time.”

“Don’t worry.” Nakabito rolled a pen absently between his fingers. “I’m a better Agent than that. Besides, they’re focused on other antagonists for the time being. The Space Pirate Ryoko has proven to be an adequate scapegoat and foil — people are already suspicious of her and scared of her motives. And I’ve fixed their attentions very firmly on Jurai — particularly on Lord Tennan. In light of that, they’ll look at me as a friend, not an enemy.”

“I have faith in your ability to deceive.” His companion reflected. “So long as it’s them you’re deceiving, little brother... and not me.”

“I’ve never lied to you yet, Oniisan.” Nakabito said firmly. “Especially not with something of this much importance. Or did you forget that I enrolled in the Elite in the first place to try and do something to bring Jurai into line with other planetary bodies? I wanted to tackle the corruption and the domination they’ve always had over the universe — even over the Police. My encounters with Seiryō Tennan at the Academy only confirmed everything I already knew about Juraian. And if I can’t do such things through legitimate Galaxy Police channels — I’ll find other ways to do it. Mother had a lot of old friends, after all — and with your connections to the munitions industry, we both are well placed to pull this off. Kanemitsu’s rebels have always had one fatal flaw, after all. They’ve never cooperated with one another in pursuit of their ultimate goal. Until now. Until they had us pulling the strings.”

“Mother and the other Sumire martyrs came as close as anyone ever has to securing Kanemitsu’s freedom from Juraian government.” His companion agreed. “But it’s only really with you and your connections, Junichi, that we’re able to attempt this at all. Which is why I want you to be careful. We know from Mother’s fate that they won’t hesitate to kill people in their way.”

“Well, nor will we, if the need demands it.” Nakabito said frankly. “The Earth is a pitiful planet, the people are unintelligent and simple, the technology basic at best. In terms of a sacrificial lamb, they’ll do quite nicely. You do your part of the job, Oniisan, and I’ll do mine... all right?”

“All right. I won’t tell an Elite spy how to do his job.” A wry smile touched the older man’s lips. “So give me an update, then. This Ishida man you dug up — he’s proven useful?”

“Yes.” Nakabito looked thoughtful. “He has a lot of influence on this planet, and many connections. And he’s been very easy to dupe.”

His gaze flitted across the dash of the ship to where his stun blaster lay.

“Although there was a faint wavering among them today.” He admitted. “Still, I think I took care of that. I don’t imagine they’ll have any sympathies towards alien life in the immediate future. As I said, having a notorious space pirate living on the Earth is proving a blessing in disguise. And that she has some kind of connection to Jurai herself — it couldn’t be better laid.”

“I’ll trust you to take care of the Earth, then.” His brother smiled. “And you leave Jurai in my hands.”

“Are you wanting to send another agent?” Nakabito asked softly. His brother shrugged, shaking his head.

“Not at the moment, although it’s not an impossibility.” He admitted. “No. Right now I’m sifting through the other information that he managed to leak to me before his cover was blown. Information about a new design of inter-galactic weapon. The plans are top-secret, and the design highly technical. But with the resources we have on Kanemitsu, it could be built. Such a weapon has the stamp of Jurai all over it — doubtless it was something of this nature that blew that Kihaku rock out of existence. That being so, we’re going to have a crack at building one under the guise of our business contract. How better to compound Juraian guilt by destroying the Earth with their own top secret technology? Even the Science Academy haven’t laid paws on this one. And with the amendments we’ve made to Earth’s defences already, they won’t be able to do a thing about it, when it comes.”

“Really.” Nakabito’s eyes narrowed, then he laughed.

“I suppose it’s a fitting punishment.” He agreed. “And the Earth’s scientific knowledge is really not great enough to understand any of

the technology they're using... so much to our benefit, in this instance. All right. You do that, then. And keep me updated. I'm heading back to Headquarters now, in any case. I've dug up a lead within the Police — someone who I think might feel the same way about Seiryō Tennan as I do, judging from the files our agent sent me."

"Really?" His brother sounded interested. "How so?"

"Apparently Tennan tried to kill her, and she testified against him in some kind of Tribunal about it." Nakabito replied. "I'm going to talk to her and see if I can find out the missing pieces from that file."

"Well, just be careful not to give yourself away." His companion warned. "I know you get irrational where Tennan is concerned... don't let it cloud your judgement. We agreed that he'd be the ultimate scapegoat, if at all possible — but this is a bigger goal, overall. We're taking down Jurai, remember? We're not sacrificing the people on Earth just to settle your personal score. This is about Kanemitsu's freedom — and not just Kanemitsu. So keep it in mind — all right? For Mother's sake... remember that?"

"All right, all right. I know." Nakabito nodded impatiently. "I am capable of doing my job, you know."

"Just see that you do." His brother warned him. "This is Akihiro, over and out."

The screen flickered again, then flashed to black, and Nakabito sighed, sitting back in his chair as he contemplated the conversation.

"For Kanemitsu's freedom. For Mother's sake." He murmured. "I know, Oniisan, I know. But they weren't the only wounds at Juraian hands."

He got to his feet, scooping up a faded old book from the shelf as he paced restlessly across the driveroom of his ship. Flicking it open, he glanced through the pictures, then with a flash of anger tossed it aside, running his fingers through his thick hair as he fought to calm the impulses of rage and despair that flared up inside of him.

"I won't forget Yuriko so easily." He muttered. "She deserves revenge too. Because of you, Seiryō Tennan, she left the Academy. She left her hopes, her dreams... she ran off into the night. Because of you, she went back to Seniwa. Because of you."

He clenched his fists, remembering the brief trip he had taken to Seniwa to find her, not long after their initial separation.

“She told me then that she loved Seiryō.” He murmured, his voice shaking slightly. “That... that she couldn’t be around him, and she didn’t want to be around me. She... she gave up all that, for a man who didn’t even bother to remember her name. And then... and then...”

He closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly.

“And then she was killed.” He whispered. “A stupid accident — a needless accident. If she’d still been at the Academy, she would never... but she was on Seniwa when the fire began, and... and... and she wouldn’t leave until everyone was out. Yuriko... its Seiryō’s fault. It’s *always* been Tennan’s fault! If you’d never left the Academy — this would never have happened! And I’d have won you back... somehow, I would have proven to you...”

He sighed, closing his eyes as he forcibly brought himself back under control.

“But Oniisan is right.” He murmured with a frown. “This isn’t something I can lose my composure over. Not yet. Not until I’ve done what we’ve set out to do. He destroyed my future and hers, with his selfish, arrogant, Juraian ways. I’ll quite happily do the same for him. By the time this is over...”

He clenched his fists.

“Seiryō Tennan will wish he’d never been born!”

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

“Are you sure you’re all right now?”

As her young companion sat back against the padded cushions of the armchair, Yume held out a glass of water, a concerned expression on her pretty features as she knelt beside him, resting her arms on the seat’s arm as she gazed at him. “You were quite out cold for a while there — are you sure it’s all right, for you to just come home and not go to a hospital?”

“I’m all right.” Kenichi said pensively, taking the glass and sipping the water tentatively. “Thank you for helping me... fortunately I wasn’t far from home. I’m a little... out of it still, to be honest. But... I... I don’t think I’m hurt.”

He cast her a smile, but Yume could see the flicker of apprehension in his eyes. “Thankfully you were around... though how you knew to bring me here, I don’t understand.”

“Ah.” Yume smiled, reaching across to the coffee table to scoop up his wallet. She handed it to him, offering him a conspiratorial wink. “There’s no magic trick to it, I’m afraid. Your address and your front door key were both in there — I just took a gamble and brought you home. It wasn’t far, like you said. And out on the street — everyone was still a bit shaken by what happened. I thought it would be quieter for you, if we were to come back here.”

She set the wallet down, eying him keenly.

“You look a little pale, but better than you did.” She added. “Perhaps you’re right. Though it wouldn’t hurt to make sure.”

“No... I’m all right.” Kenichi decided, setting his water aside as he met her gaze. “You were there, after all. My guardian angel or something, maybe.”

“Are you in trouble with someone, Kenichi-kun?” Yume asked softly, and Kenichi started, staring at her.

“How did you know my...?” He began, then he smiled, shaking his head. “My wallet. Right. I should have got that already — sorry. Like I said, I’m still a little bit out of it.”

"It's all right." Yume flashed him a smile, getting to her feet and perching on the arm of the chair as she absently took her arm in his, feeling for his pulse. "Your heartrate sounds more steady than it did, too. I think whatever it was that knocked you out just stunned you for a while, that's all."

"Stunned, huh." Kenichi's lips thinned. "I bet it was that pirate woman. I've heard all about her powers."

"Pirate woman? Powers?" Yume stared at him, her eyes widening. For a moment there was silence, and Yume gauged his expression, waiting patiently for her companion to speak.

"Nothing." Kenichi said at length. "Just someone I don't like very much. Someone I think would probably hurt anyone... if they had the chance."

"That woman you were talking to, when you... when it... happened?" Yume asked innocently, and Kenichi nodded.

"Yes. Her." He agreed darkly.

"Are you really not friends?" Yume feigned ignorance. "Because she and her friend stopped to make sure you were all right before they left. I thought you must be friends... forgive me."

"Believe me, we're not friends." Kenichi shook his head. "Not in this or the next lifetime... more likely she wanted to see whether or not she'd killed me."

"No... the young lady didn't hurt you." Yume shook her head. "It was a man with some kind of weapon... it looked like a gun, but I guess... I think it was a teenager with one of those mocked up stun-weapons. There have been so many reports of gang activity in the papers lately."

She pretended to shiver, shaking her head.

"You were lucky it wasn't a proper gun." She added. "And that I took a short cut back from my lecture to help you."

"A man?" Kenichi looked startled, and Yume nodded.

"Yes. Definitely a man." She agreed. "But I don't know who he was. He's not the kind of person I socialise with."

"I haven't even asked you your name." Kenichi realised at this point, embarrassment flickering in his gaze as he looked up at her. "I'm being really rude, aren't I? I'm sorry. You already know that I'm Kenichi Ishida, but I don't know to whom I owe my life."

"I'm the one who should be apologising — I should have introduced myself." Yume laughed. "Manami Kurashida. Pleased to meet you. And I... I'm not really a doctor, exactly. I mean, I... I'm a final year medical student. But I figured... well, I wanted to help you, and..."

She sent him a sidelong glance, flushing a little colour to her cheeks as she chewed down on her lip.

"I always just charge in, when someone is in trouble." She admitted. "It's just the way I am. And you seem like a nice person, Kenichi-san. So I'm glad I could help."

"Kurashida-san." Kenichi returned her smile. "Or no, Kurashida-sensei — isn't that more appropriate?"

"No... call me Manami. Please." Yume shook her head. "I hate formality — it always seems to just put up barriers between people. Don't you think so?"

"I guess so." Kenichi acknowledged. "All right. Manami it is. Pleased to meet you, Manami. Thank you again for coming to my rescue today."

"You're welcome, Kenichi-kun. Anytime." Yume assured him.

"So... you're a student... do you live in Osaka?"

"At the moment, yes, although in term-time I'm at school in Tokyo." Yume shook her head. "But one of the doctors on my holiday reading list was giving a talk at one of the hospitals here in Osaka this week, so I came to spend a while with my aunt's family. They live just outside the city."

"Then that's why we've not met before." Kenichi ruminated. Yume laughed, nodding.

"I guess so." She agreed playfully. "In truth, it's a long time since I've been in Osaka. At least a year... maybe more."

She eyed him keenly.

"Kenichi-kun, why did you think that girl would hurt you?" She asked softly. "You don't seem the sort of person to get wrapped up in trouble — am I wrong? You seem like a nice normal guy — I don't want you to get hurt."

"I'm not in trouble." Kenichi shook his head. "It's just that woman. Manami, how do you feel about all the alien stuff? The intergalactic alliance and all of those things?"

"The intergalactic...?" Yume frowned, inwardly making up her

mind the course she should take as she read the flicker of fanaticism in Kenichi's dark eyes. "I don't know, to be honest. I can't say I've met any aliens, so I suppose it doesn't affect me too much. Why?"

"That woman I was arguing with — she's one of them." Kenichi said flatly. "She's already been involved in blowing stuff up — and she's got a criminal record a mile long. She's dangerous, and yet noone is doing anything about it in the interest of intergalactic relations. You're not from Osaka, so you won't necessarily know, but a year ago someone blew up a nightclub in the centre of this city. She was involved in that. But noone ever charged her with anything. Because she's what they're calling a 'settler', she can just do as she pleases."

Yume stared at him, injecting the right amount of horror into her expression, and Kenichi nodded.

"That's why I thought it was her." He added. "But even if it wasn't, it doesn't mean it wasn't some accomplice. She has a partner — a guy called Haki, or something like it. I guess it could've been him. Like I said, noone's monitoring what this crazy witch is up to — and she's able to run riot around the place under the pretence of being here for Earth's sake. I don't like it — any of it. Things are degenerating and I don't want to live in a world dominated by alien rule. Do you?"

"You really think that could happen?" Yume made her eyes big with fear, and Kenichi inclined his head.

"I know it could." He said with a sigh. "It's just common sense. What kind of major super power ever gives things away for free? Sooner or later this Jurai will expect repayment — or to be able to take control of the Earth themselves, which is what I'm afraid of. We've seen it time and time again on this planet, how big, powerful empires have overrun smaller, more helpless ones in the pursuit of land and power. I've studied history as much as the next person. I know that it's just a matter of time before this plays out in space, too. After all, in that respect, why should we trust them? They have technology and power we know nothing about. And people like that Ryoko woman — they're the advance guard. The ones to lull us into a false sense of security. Today's incident is just proof of it."

Yume bit her lip, then she shook her head, slipping her fingers into Kenichi's and squeezing his hands tightly.

"I won't let them hurt you again." She said quietly. "If you're right, I won't let them try and silence you, Kenichi-kun. I'm doubly glad I saved you, if that's the truth. Someone has to speak up for the Earth

— you're right. And I... I'm on your side."

Kenichi stared at her, then he grinned, his expression softening.

"I'm sorry. It's all dark and political and serious." He said evenly. "And it's no way to thank you — scaring you half out of your wits with all this random stuff."

"Perhaps." Yume sat back, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "But there are things the public should know... if you're right, the people have a right, don't they?"

"That's exactly what I think." Kenichi nodded his head firmly. "But enough of that. I'd like to thank you properly, Manami — for coming to my rescue like that. Are you staying in Osaka beyond today, or...?"

"Yes." Yume adopted a surprised look. "A few more days. Why?"

"Will you let me take you out tonight, then, as repayment?"

"You don't owe me anything, Kenichi-kun." Yume touched him playfully on the cheek. "I'm training to be a doctor. It's my vocation."

"Even so, I'd like to." Kenichi admitted. "You... well, I don't often get my life saved by pretty medical undergraduates. And I'd like to get to know you better — if you don't have any objections. Sure, it's an original way to meet a woman, I grant you, but... maybe it's fate that we met this way?"

He paused, eying her hopefully, and Yume laughed, amusement flickering in Manami's aqua eyes.

"All right." She relented. "If you feel that way, I won't refuse you."

"Good... so shall I pick you up, or...?"

"Name the place and I'll meet you there." Yume suggested. "You shouldn't be driving around after being unconscious, and I like to walk. It's good for the circulation."

"I guess I should've seen that coming, from a med student." Kenichi said wryly. "All right. Hiraki's, then, in the main square -at around eight this evening? Is that all right? Do you know the place I mean?"

Yume nodded her head.

"I do." She agreed. "And I'll be there."

She winked at him, offering a playful smile.

"After all, Kenichi-kun, I'd like to get to know *you* better too."

He had to get to grips with this.

Seiryō walked purposefully into the military training ground, his fingers closing around the hilt of his sword as he re-affirmed his resolution, bringing it out before his eyes and watching as the blade flickered with hot white light. He glanced at it for a moment, his brows knitting together as he struggled to gauge the emotions that swirled up inside of him. Kiyone had gone back to Headquarters, and though he had told himself that it hadn't mattered, as he stared at the dazzling glow of his sword, he felt distinctly hollow inside.

For a moment, he allowed his melancholy to seep through his body, teasing at his heart and his spirit as he registered the fact he was once more alone at the austere Juraian court. Tokimi's words echoed in his head, and he bit his lip.

"She was right, damn her." He murmured. "I... am... lonely? Dammit, when did it get to be so bad as this? Bringing her here... what did I do to myself, letting her come when I was so unprepared?"

He stared at his blade a little longer, and then a little of his fighting spirit surfaced in his heart as he rallied himself, nodding purposefully.

"I will be in control of myself." He muttered, even as he began the rigorous, brisk training exercise that for years he had run through at dawn whilst improving his skills with the Galaxy Police. "I am *not* going to be at the mercy of these emotions. I am not going to let myself be taken in by them! It's foolish, stupid nonsense. I won't stand for it! I *won't*!"

He slashed and parried, sweat beading across his brow as he pushed himself remorselessly through each test.

"I will *not* be in love with Kiyone." He told himself firmly. "I will not succumb to something so completely futile — I am not that weak! I don't have time to deal with this now. Mother is dead, I have so much to think of... why is it that Kiyone can bother me so much? What *is* it about that woman? I *refuse* to be in love with her. I refuse to be involved in such matters! She is my *friend* and she was here to support me... how can I betray that by allowing myself to think in this way? Or Mother — how can I betray Mother, by feeling like this when she lies awaiting her final rites!"

His grasp on the sword hilt tightened, as once more Kiyone's face flickered across his line of vision and he cursed, sweeping his blade as if to disperse the ghost that stood before him.

"*Why* do I miss her so much, dammit? *Why* do I care so badly

whether or not she's here on Jurai?"

"You're on form this morning, Lord Tennan."

The voice of the Prince Consort broke through his mindset and he wheeled around, his blade still tightly gripped in his hand as he faced his rival, meeting his gaze stoically with an impassive one of his own.

"Lord Takeru." He said quietly. "I thought that I was quite alone this morning. Forgive me."

"Perhaps you should sheath your blade before you speak so." Takeru pursed his lips. "And I also had presumed to find this place empty. You don't often come here, Lord Tennan. I am surprised to see you here now. Especially in light of the fact that you have been absent from court these last days."

Seiryō frowned, but obediently lowered his weapon, the blade flickering and dying.

"If you will excuse me, I do not seek company." He said flatly. "I will leave — you are the Prince Consort, after all, and I shall not intervene in your will."

"Seiryō, wait." Takeru held up his hand, and Seiryō faltered, surprise glittering in his eyes at the sudden drop in his companion's formality.

"Lord Takeru?"

"I am glad to have a chance to speak to you." Takeru admitted. "At least briefly. And as for this place, you were here first. I won't intervene — you have as much right to be here as any noble of the Emperor's council and court."

"*You* wished to speak to *me*?" Seiryō's eyes narrowed. "If you have an errand for me, I must decline. Surely you realise I have much else on my plate at present — much to organise and settle among my family's affairs."

"Yes, and it is that I wish to speak to you about." Takeru acknowledged. "I am grieved for your family, Seiryō-sama. You may not believe me, but it remains the truth. I had the utmost respect and affection for your late mother. In all respects she replaced my own mother, when we were children — I am sorry that she is gone."

"Her suffering has ended." Seiryō said simply, forcing the pain from his expression as he kept his tones level and even. "That is something to be thankful for, at least."

“Indeed.” Takeru pursed his lips, then, “I wish your permission to attend her memorial. I know it is soon — and that my sister in law is attending to give Lady Kaede her blessing. But I should like to come in an unofficial capacity — I would like to pay my last respects to such a fine and respected woman.”

Seiryō started, his immediate instinct to rebuff his companion’s request quelled by the sincerity in the Prince Consort’s eyes. He sighed, slowly nodding his head.

“I cannot refuse you, when I know Mother would have wanted you to come.” He said, resigned. “I would not deny her any wishes, even in death. If it is your will to attend, Lord Takeru, so be it. I shall not prevent you.”

Relief and gratitude flickered in Takeru’s eyes, and he smiled, bowing his head in acknowledgement.

“I am grateful.” He said gently. “I know it is a painful time, the loss of a loved one. I’m glad you can find it in your time of grief to understand what she once meant to me, as well.”

“Yes.” Seiryō turned away from his companion, frowning as he remembered their many encounters as young boys. “My mother was fond of you, it’s true. Even, I confess, enough so to make me resent your constant presence in my childhood. We shared much, Takeru-sama, but we were never friends. And yet she always thought well of you. I believe she would want me to welcome you, no matter what my own feelings on the subject.”

“Resent?” Takeru frowned. “I hadn’t realised that it affected you at all. You seemed more concerned with impressing your father, when we were young. Not your mother.”

“I hated my father.” Seiryō spoke in low tones, his grip tightening once more on the blade-hilt that he still held clutched between his fingers. “Hated him. I never sought to impress him — he was not the kind of man whose favour was worth earning. You have no understanding of me or of my family, Lord Takeru. I have given you what you wanted — if you have no further business, I should like to be left alone now.”

Takeru hesitated, then he shook his head.

“Lord Tennan, I am truly sorry.” He said quietly. “I feel like our entire lives have been dogged by misunderstanding.”

“Perhaps there is a reason for that.” Now in control of his expressions, Seiryō turned back towards his foe, meeting his gaze. “I

do not need your pity, simply because my family are under strain at present. Many families lose loved ones. It's something to be dealt with... and it can be borne. But it is not helped when well meaning men of the Court put their good manners above their good sense and try to interfere."

Takeru started for a moment at the cool note in Seiryō's tone, then he smiled ruefully, inclining his head.

"You have always thought me devoid of any personality or feeling." He reflected. "A simple, well-educated clone of my father, who considers everything before he speaks his mind. And I have always seen you either as a hot head or a man cold to the world — someone who darts between extremes and never lets anyone too far in to see beyond. Is this who we truly are, Lord Tennan? Are we to remain rivals till death because of the impressions formed in our youth?"

"It bothers me not at all, my friend." Seiryō leant back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest, and Takeru observed his defensive gesture with some interest. He smiled again.

"It bothers me." He admitted. "My Lady sister-in-law, Princess Sasami, is truly fond of you. And indeed, I have seen and heard much good of you, while you have been in her service. I have come to realise that you are a very clever man — but that very few people truly know how clever. And more, how much you care about the Princess you serve, even as much as you care about fulfilling your duties. So though you stand before me today as calm and level as you ever are, I can see beyond that for once. I can see how struck you are with grief by your mother's death, and I can see, simmering beneath the surface, your desire to pull your blade on me and settle your grievances once and for all. Do you believe that by concealing these feelings, they will simply leave you alone? It seems to me that our continuing rivalry stems from an inability to discuss and manage the issues in our past. Will we be this way for all time?"

"I told you, it doesn't worry me if we are." Seiryō said coldly. "You presume a lot, Lord Imada. Even as the Consort of the Princess Ayeka, you have no right to assume or pry into my thoughts or feelings, whether your judgement be true or otherwise. Tennan business has never been Imada business, despite the rapport you might have shared with my mother."

"Yes, but we are neither one of us Tennan or Imada in the same way we were as youths, when your father and mine crossed paths." Takeru reasoned. "Or when we fought, stick on stick, over the hand of a teenage girl. Those things are a lifetime past. You have lived quite

another existence with the Galaxy Police since then. In truth, I almost envy you that opportunity. You were always a promising fighter, even when I beat you in that fight when we were just young adolescent boys. But watching you today, I realise exactly how much you have changed. You have true skill.”

“And you seek to placate me, because you realise now that I am capable of killing you in a one to one fight?” Seiryō raised his eyebrow. “I have no desire to be accused of treason, thank you. You can rest assured — your life is quite safe. In any case, Lady Sasami would be grieved if I hurt her sister in that way.”

“I do not seek a truce because I fear your blade.” Takeru shook his head. “Though I am glad you do not wish to fight me.”

“I didn’t say that.” A slight, humourless smile twitched at Seiryō’s lips. “I said I would not kill you, not that I didn’t wish to, somewhere in my heart. But as you so astutely observe, Lord Takeru, I am well in control of *all* my emotions. And I would never let my guard down enough to be baited into such a conflict. It would shame my family, and I am the Lord of the Tennan estate. I will not betray my kin by acting in such a way. Even towards you.”

Takeru was silent for a moment, contemplating. Then he smiled.

“Yes. You are more intelligent than I gave you credit for.” He admitted. “I’m sorry for that.”

“Why are you being so warm towards me, all of a sudden?” Seiryō asked suspiciously. “I’ve already given you consent to attend Mother’s memorial. Why else would you want to placate me?”

“There is something else.” Takeru pursed his lips. “But it seems a bad time to raise it with you, considering how much else you have on your plate at present.”

Seiryō’s eyes narrowed.

“If you have something to say, Lord Takeru, say it.”

“Very well.” Takeru nodded. “If you wish it, I will.”

He moved further into the room, pausing a few feet before his companion as he assessed his fellow noble’s rigid demeanour.

“My Lady wife has not been in good health recently.” He said softly. “You may or may not be aware, but she has not been her usual self in some respects.”

“I have seen very little of Lady Ayeka of late. I have had my own

concerns.” Seiryō said simply. “I trust it is not serious, this ill health?”

“No.” Takeru shook his head. “In fact, quite the contrary. Yesterday we were blessed with good news. It seems that Jurai is to be gifted a royal heir — a child who will, one day, succeed in Ayeka’s footsteps as leader of Jurai.”

Despite himself, Seiryō stared.

“A baby?” He demanded, his composure shattered for a moment, and Takeru inclined his head in agreement.

“Yes.” He said, unable to keep the pride from his tones. “Lady Sasami has told Ayeka that it will be a son, and that he will be blessed with Jurai’s power. It is a great thing.”

“And why are you telling me this now, when I seek to bury my mother?” Seiryō demanded. Takeru frowned.

“I did say the timing was inappropriate.” He reminded his companion. “But I have done much thinking on this topic. On the necessities of court... and on how highly Sasami-chan thinks of you, as well as anything else. This morning’s meeting with you seemed opportune, to say the least. Perhaps prophetic.”

“Get to the point.” Seiryō snapped, and Takeru spread his hands.

“My son will be a Prince, a soldier, and a protector of his people one day. That is his destiny, even before he takes air into his lungs for the first time.” He said softly. “So Sasami has told Ayeka... so I believe it with all my heart.”

He sighed.

“I am a warrior in that I can hold a sword and fight my corner.” he admitted reluctantly. “But the dangers of the universe are much greater than I have experienced. And yet, I want my son to grow up with every knowledge and advantage... everything that he will need, to continue Jurai’s current peace when his time comes.”

He met his rival’s gaze with a serious one of his own and Seiryō realised with a jolt how difficult such a concession had been for his childhood rival.

“I think that of all the noble court, you alone have the requisite experience to teach him to the very highest level. And so, I hoped to reach out an olive branch to you. The Crown will need your help.”

“The boy isn’t born yet, and you ask me this?” Seiryō was taken completely aback, his other grievances forgotten in light of this news.

“Why such a panic? Ayeka-hime isn't even Queen yet.”

“Given the treachery and bloodshed in the previous generation, Ayeka is anxious to have everything smoothly in place from the moment he enters this world.” Takeru said soberly. “And I can understand her fears — I feel the same way. Her cousin Lord Yoshō left Jurai. Her other cousin Kagato sought to dominate or destroy it. Her aunt was slain, perhaps murdered at her own son's hand. These things are black deeds... the boy will need to fend for himself as soon as he can. And for us to continue such a rivalry as we've always had... rivalries create mistrust and uncertainty. I don't want my son to grow up with that, Seiryō. I don't want anything to question the stability and security of Jurai's throne. Not now... not ever. That is why I have come to you in this way.”

“And you think that you can trust in my loyalty, even considering our past?” Seiryō raised an eyebrow. “That I'd put the past behind me in the honour of undertaking involvement in the Prince's training? A Prince not even yet born? You expect much, Takeru.”

Takeru nodded his head.

“I know I do. But Sasami trusts you, and her opinion carries much weight.” He said quietly. “If you would consider it.”

“My Princess has a lot of faith in me, but at the moment I cannot consider anything else than the matters at hand.” Seiryō said slowly, although inwardly he found himself faintly grateful to the Consort for having shaken him out of his dark reverie with his news. “Still, you really are determined to call a truce between us, aren't you? Is this, then, really for the sake of Jurai's political future? You would rather have me as your ally, even lukewarm, so that you can utilise my skills... and prevent any temptation I might have to stray from Jurai's crown again in the future?”

“I suppose that is it, yes.” Takeru looked rueful. “I would rather have you as a supporter of my son, not his enemy.”

“Good.” Seiryō admitted. “I'd rather know there was motivation, and that it wasn't just pity for my mother's passing. That I could never forgive.”

“And I would not offer it.” Takeru said seriously.

Seiryō glanced down at his sword.

“Being home is not easy at the moment.” He admitted. “I am surplus to requirement. Suki is very capable, and I have energy and tension to work off. I came here to do just that... otherwise I may lose

my temper with someone who does not deserve it.”

“I see.” Takeru looked thoughtful, then he slipped his hand beneath his cape, pulling his own sword out and glancing at it. “Well, since we both are here...”

“Are you thinking to challenge me, Prince Consort?” Seiryō’s eyebrow raised as he realised what his companion intended. “Even after your admission that I am stronger than you now? Do you not remember our fight on the Earth?”

“I remember, though I also recall the mad look in your eye and the influence of Tokimi-sama’s dark magic over you.” Takeru said calmly. “I do not fear you, Seiryō. I never have. Besides, I am coming to believe that Lady Sasami is right. Whoever you were before you joined the Galaxy Police — even before you became wound up in Kii magic — you are not that man now. Even I, who has hated you this long, can see the positive aspects of your character now that I never could before. I do not know if it is Lady Sasami’s faith in you that effected this transformation, or whether your own will to change inspired Lady Sasami to trust in you. But either way, I see why the Emperor now trusts you. It has taken time, but I do see.”

“Maintaining loyalty to a Princess such as Lady Sasami is not difficult.” Seiryō said evenly. “She is the kind of mistress who demands both friendship and respect, and I value that. She has always been open with me, and never judged me on my past actions. I believe such faith should be duly rewarded with good service.”

He frowned, flickering a blade to his sword.

“Very well.” He added. “If you wish to fight me, I will not refuse. But I am not an easy man to disarm, Lord Takeru. We are not sixteen year old boys, and even without Tokimi’s magic, I have lost few one on one combats. Many, many pirates and other criminals fell foul of my blade, ending up in my custody or beyond the help of the law. I do not play the sparring games of rich young men with nothing to do. When I fight, I fight to win.”

“But you already said that you would not kill me, so I don’t feel my life is in peril.” Takeru said serenely. “Besides, this is not a combat between foes, but a test of my strength and skill against your own. We both, it seems, have tension to work out of us. Perhaps it would be the best way to do it — in a friendly challenge between equals.”

“I am not your equal, Lord Takeru. You are Lady Ayeka’s husband, and Prince Consort of Jurai.” Seiryō said acidly. Takeru shook his head.

“By birth we are equals. You a Tennan, I an Imada.” He said softly. “Who you or I marry does not change that fact.”

Seiryō started, his eyes widening at this, and Takeru frowned, looking confused.

“Lord Tennan? Is something amiss?”

“No. Nothing is amiss.” Seiryō shook his head, forcing the sudden image of Kiyone from his mind as he set his thoughts on the combat ahead. “I had just not thought of it in those terms before. That’s all.”

He raised his sword, determination in his eyes.

“I am ready.” He said softly. “Let’s see what you are truly made of, Takeru.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

It was late by the time Yume returned to the mountain home and, as she slipped into the building, removing her cloak and hanging it on its hook, she was aware of someone watching her from the darkness, arms folded impatiently as if they had been waiting for some time. She turned, casting the pirate a confused look as she did so.

“Ryoko?” She murmured. “Are you waiting for me, or...?”

“You’ll do, although I was waiting for Tenchi to get back.” Ryoko admitted. “His train from Osaka seems to have run late — and after this morning Washu told me not to go to the station, in case it attracts attention. The pair of you have been out doing whatever you’ve been doing most of the afternoon and aside from taking Sakura home, I’ve done nothing but sit twiddling my thumbs. She also thinks that right now we should keep Tenchi out of all of this, so that’s had me tied, too... I don’t like keeping things from him, and I feel like I’m being useless at the moment. In short, I’m getting fed up and twitchy — so you better have something to report.”

“Tenchi’s in Osaka too?” Yume eyed her in some confusion. “I didn’t realise.”

“Yes. With Kane Kyoda.” Ryoko said grimly, grabbing the droid by the arm and steering her towards Washu’s secret laboratory. “You must have gathered that they’re all buddy-buddy at the moment Tenchi is real keen to work things out with him for some reason — another reason why we’re not telling him anything about this till we have to. Washu and I are still convinced that Kane’s up to something more than patching up their friendship, though... what did you find out from that Ishida kid?”

“Kenichi?” Yume’s eyes narrowed, as she pushed open the door, stepping inside and casting the waiting scientist a grin. “Hi, Washu. Sorry to keep you both waiting. Kenichi-san invited me out to dinner, and I thought, in the circumstances, I ought to take him up on his offer.”

“How do you manage that?” Ryoko eyed her curiously. “You don’t eat.”

“I don’t need to, but it doesn’t mean I can’t, if the need arises.”

Yume shrugged her shoulders. “Remember what I was designed to be, Ryoko — the perfect shape-shifter, who can duplicate someone’s identity perfectly. And to really fit into situations, I have to be fully adaptable. That means that, in practical terms, anything a human can do, I can do just as easily. At least on the surface — I am alive.”

“Inside too, these days.” Washu assured her gently, and Yume shot her a grateful grin, morphing her features back into her more normal day to day appearance.

“I’m glad you think so.” She admitted now, sitting down on a vacant stool as she folded her hands in her lap. “But I’m happy to put my other capabilities to good use, too — especially if this is something that’s going to affect all of us directly.”

“In some ways, Yume, you less than the rest of us.” Washu said grimly. “You can, as you just said, blend in. And change how you appear to other people.”

“Perhaps, but you’re all my family now, and I’m not going to abandon you.” Yume grinned. “Besides, it wasn’t hard to gain Kenichi’s trust. He strikes me as the sort of young man who likes to get a girl’s attention but hasn’t really had one for a while... if you know what I mean.”

“Yume, please tell me you didn’t get whatever information you have by seducing this guy?” Ryoko demanded. “I may be sick, if you did — you are a robot, or did you forget?”

“Not when I appear like Manami, but no, I didn’t.” Yume looked amused. “I didn’t need to go that far — I’m not that kind of droid, Ryoko. Not on a first date, anyway.”

Washu laughed appreciatively, nodding her head.

“Why is everyone else okay with this?” Ryoko exclaimed. “Yume, I thought you’d done being the robot taking orders... why are you so casual about this?”

“You sound concerned about me.” Yume teased, and Ryoko snorted.

“Well, you say you love Tenchi.” She retorted. “But you’re still willing to seduce any number of other men... what’s with that?”

“I’m not likely to seduce Tenchi, now am I?” Yume said matter-of-factly. “Don’t be silly. And why does it matter? This is to *protect* Tenchi — I don’t understand why you’re so wound up. I’m a robot — it can’t do me any harm. I’m not open to disease or to pregnancy... and it’s not like I haven’t been well schooled in the correct procedure.

Stop being fussy, Ryoko. I won't go to that level with Kenichi unless I have to — but sometimes people reveal their deepest, darkest secrets when they're at their most vulnerable. That's something I've learnt — the best time to strike is when they trust you completely. And what better position of trust than that?"

"I really am going to be sick." Ryoko decided. "I don't know which of you two is worse!"

"You're very moralistic tonight, Ryoko. That's not like you." Washu scolded. "Yume's right. And if she doesn't have a problem with it — why should you?"

Ryoko grimaced.

"I just think it's kinda sick. That's all." She said with a sigh. "That Yume's a robot, and she's... doing that. And... that means she might want to do that... with my Tenchi. And that... makes me want to hurl. So..."

"Oh, don't be stupid." Yume chuckled. "Ryoko, stop it. Please. Listen to me. I was designed to be a spy droid. An infiltrator — a shapeshifter. To find out information, I was programmed to go to whatever lengths necessary. That was Zero's mission. And Zero is still inside of me. Right now, it's her capabilities I'm using. Yume is the one who loves Tenchi. And Yume also knows Tenchi loves you — so she'd never even dream of trying to cross that line. But if Zero's abilities can help Yume protect Tenchi and the ones he cares about, so be it. I'm only doing what I was taught to do. And whatever effect sex has on the human body — it has no effect on mine. But like I said, I didn't need to take it to that level with Kenichi. He seemed quite happy to talk to me — particularly about you, to begin with."

"About me?" Ryoko frowned. "I suppose I should've known."

"He was sure you'd been the one to hurt him, but I set him straight." Yume responded. "I told him it was a guy, but he then took the line that it must've been a friend of yours. He actually mentioned Haki by name — how the hell an Earth kid would know who Haki was when I didn't until all that business with Yousai is beyond me, but he does, and he seems to think the man is still alive."

"So what line did you take?" Washu leant back against her chair, eying her assistant with interest. "Did you try and plead Ryoko's innocence, or...?"

"Not exactly." Yume shook her head. "I decided that, for the time being, Manami would do better allying herself with Kenichi and

expressing some doubts about the safety of the Earth. Kenichi Ishida has an insecurity complex... and that's easy to exploit."

She shrugged.

"I feel sort of sorry for him, being the son of a rich and important man but not having his own independent identity away from all of that." She added. "This alien thing has got him all fired up — like he's trying to prove himself. And I gave him someone to protect and prove himself to, that's all."

"You're a manipulative bitch under all that illusion, in fact." Ryoko reflected, and Yume nodded.

"Since I became Yume, I've learnt much more about human emotions and how to feel them." She agreed. "But also how to work with them. Kenichi needs someone to show off to, and Manami's becoming that person. So I've said I'll meet up with him again. He's not very discreet, and I think I might find something more out from him if he believes I'm someone he can trust."

"He did almost spew something about the Galaxy Police in the middle of the square." Ryoko admitted. "But... hey, you said you saw that guy who shot him. You did, right? That wasn't a lie?"

"No, I saw him." Yume agreed. "I've tried cross-referencing all my databanks, Washu, but there's no match. I'm sort of surprised, to be honest, that that's the case... I thought that, if I probed deeply enough, I'd find one."

"Why so?" Washu looked curious. "Yume, your memory is extremely reliable, but not a complete database of all lifeforms in existence. Why would you think this man should be someone you remember?"

"I don't know." Yume admitted. "I think... only because it has some connection with the Galaxy Police. And when I was under Clay's control, he instilled a lot of information into me about Seiryō Tennan and his fellow officers at Headquarters. Allies that could be called on in Seiryō's time of need — that could be manipulated as drones by Tokimi's magic to do her will. This man was definitely Galaxy Police — his weapon gave that away, so he must be affiliated somewhere. However..."

"However, he's not in your memory-bank." Washu frowned, and Yume shook her head.

"No." She agreed.

“So maybe he’s new since then.” Ryoko suggested. “A recruit since that time.”

“No... he’d have to be someone pretty high up in the rankings to be able to get so deeply involved in sinister things like this without being caught.” Washu shook her head, getting to her feet and scooping up a handful of cables from the unit, glancing at her companion. “Yume, I want to transfer the file from your memory to my mainframe, and see if we can make a match.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Yume grinned, reaching into her pocket and holding out a data disk. “Here. I downloaded the relevant information onto removable media for you — I thought it’d be quicker than sifting through all of my memory files for the right one.”

“Efficient as ever.” Washu dimpled, taking the disk and slipping it into the computer. “That does save time.”

“It was only a fleeting glimpse, and he wasn’t dressed in any kind of uniform or anything that would stand out.” Yume came to stand beside her companion at the computer, Ryoko not far behind her as the screen flickered into life. “But I thought it was better than nothing.”

“So, this is the guy who tagged Kenichi Ishida, huh?” As a blurry image became visible on the screen, Ryoko squinted at it, a thoughtful look in her amber eyes. “Nope... he doesn’t mean anything to me, either. I’ve never seen him before in my life — so he’s not someone who’s been on my tail in the past, either.”

“Hrm.” Washu hit a few buttons, bringing the image into clearer focus. “I don’t recognise him either. However... with a little bit of hacking...”

She keyed in another combination, and a blue screen flashed up before them, the Galaxy Police logo blinking in the centre. Ryoko’s eyes widened.

“Is that...?”

“Headquarters’ central computer.” Washu nodded. “Unfortunately, this particular database doesn’t hold all the intimate details of crimes and criminals — I haven’t managed to find my way into that one yet. But this one is easy to access... the security is extremely poor, considering the data contained within.”

A password box appeared on the screen and she typed in a combination as the logo was replaced by long lists of data. “There. Now... to cross-reference this image of Yume’s with the images on file.

I'm sure that what you have in your memory is a truncated version of this, Yume — but with any luck, this one will cover the gaps you have."

"I guess so." Yume nodded her head, resting her hands on the unit. "There are a lot of files."

"There are, and I don't fancy zipping through all of them." Washu agreed, typing in a set of instructions and folding her arms across her chest. "This search should be quicker. But Yume, can you remember — when Clay installed the files into you, he hacked them from this server, yes?"

"I suppose he must have done." Yume nodded.

"And he was able to get information on Seiryō through this method?"

"I... I'm not sure." Yume admitted. "He certainly was able to get information on the regular division. I knew who Kiyone and Mihoshi both were before I met them. However..."

"Well, we already theorised that maybe this man is an Elite, didn't we?" Washu pursed her lips. "And the Elite database is a more secure server. Perhaps Clay's inferior skills weren't able to break that down. After all, Seiryō was already pretty much their prisoner, wasn't he? They didn't need to find the information on him, when he was already in their power."

"True." Yume reflected. "I'd already taken the precaution of obtaining much information on Jurai and the Tennan family from Seiji Tennan, before his death. And once we had the lever on Seiryō, well, it's as you say. He was already in Tokimi's power."

She sighed.

"I wonder if we should be trying to go to Jurai, actually. To speak to him." She admitted. "However, doing so..."

"Would give the people who are out to get us evidence of it." Ryoko said frankly. "And Seiryō Tennan is not really a welcome sight on the Earth. If people are asking questions about him, we don't want to be associated with him. Him coming here would be a disaster."

"Yes, I imagine it might." Washu acknowledged. "It's a pity, but it can't be helped. However..."

She trailed off, eying the screen as she digested the list of results. "Hrm. We have a few possibles."

“A few possibles?” Yume looked startled. “But one photograph — shouldn’t that mean one file?”

“It depends on what the file is.” Washu brushed a finger against the screen. “Some of these are case reports.”

She bit her lip, keying in a final set of commands as a second password box flashed up onto the screen. “And this is probably the encryption that Clay couldn’t get past. However, thanks to spending a little time aboard the Unko... I’m pretty sure I can get past it.”

“You didn’t hack Seiryō’s ship when he brought you back from Jurai the last time?” Ryoko eyed her suspiciously, and Washu laughed, shrugging.

“I had a look at some of the data on board.” She said innocently. “That’s all.”

She typed in a string of digits, and the screen cleared, revealing a secure Elite file and at the sight of the image at the top, Yume gasped, her eyes opening wide in surprise.

“That’s him!”

“That is him.” Ryoko’s eyes became mere slits. “So. Junichi Nakabito, huh? What the hell has he got to do with all of this? Whose side is he on? If he shot this Kenichi, is it really an attempt to frame me, or...?”

“I don’t know anything about him.” Washu admitted. “Though looking at his personal record, there’s nothing that stands out as particularly sinister. Quite the opposite — he has a pretty exemplary record.”

“So did Seiryō, before Clay and I corrupted him.” Yume reminded her, and Washu nodded.

“True. But in Seiryō’s case there were extenuating circumstances.”

“Extenuating circumstances?” Ryoko frowned. “Overloaded ego is a special exception now?”

“Seiryō believed his family were in danger.” Washu said evenly. “I think it was a matter of Tennan pride.”

Ryoko shot Yume a suspicious look.

“Tell me that seducing that arrogant, stuck up guy wasn’t part of your brief.” She said warily. “Because I swear, if it was... if someone in my household sank to that level of depravity...”

“Seiryo?” Yume looked surprised. Then she shook her head. “No... I didn’t need to. Besides, I don’t think he would’ve been open for it.”

She offered the pirate an innocent smile, a flicker of mischief flaring up inside of her.

“Besides, like I said, I got all the information I needed from his father Seiji. And he was much less difficult to persuade.”

“Okay, that’s it.” Ryoko pulled a face. “No more! Dammit, if Tenchi knew he was housing the ultimate electronic sex droid in his home, he’d have a heart attack! Yume, do you have no shame at all?”

“It was a mission, and Zero wasn’t programmed to have shame.” Yume said with a shrug. “Stop overreacting, Ryoko. Are you telling me that as a pirate you never took gambles or broke rules to get where you wanted more quickly?”

“Do you want me to fry you?” Ryoko’s fingers glittered with amber energy as indignation flickered into her amber eyes. “What kind of woman do you take me for? I didn’t seduce dirty, rich old men to get information, that’s for sure! I have standards, you know!”

“Zero wasn’t programmed to have standards.” Yume said unconcernedly. “It was just an order, and I completed it.”

“Clay was a really sick bastard, wasn’t he?” Ryoko mused, and Washu snorted.

“That’s stating the obvious.” She said evenly. “Not that it matters now. *This* is what we’re working on at the moment, musume-chan — try and keep focus, will you?”

“Elite agents are human just like anyone else.” Yume pointed out. “Perhaps there’s something going on here, as well.”

“Almost certainly.” Washu agreed. “The question is, what? Nothing in his police file seems to indicate anything amiss.”

“Maybe...” Yume frowned, flicking a finger in the direction of the screen. “Perhaps it is a coincidence, but... his ethnic origin...”

“Kanemitsu.” Washu’s brows knitted together.

“Kanemitsu?” Ryoko murmured. “Wasn’t that the planet that Sakuya child came from? The one who Yugi murdered and impersonated to get close to Sasami?”

“Yes.” Washu rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “Kanemitsu... that does put it in another light.”

“How so?”

“Kanemitsu have been a colony of Jurai for years.” Washu explained, tilting her chair back absently as she considered. “And they’ve made no secret about how much they hate that fact, either. There are a lot of rebel groups who want independance, as well as those who go through correct political channels to try and come to terms with Azusa and his government on Jurai. That ship that Yugi slaughtered her way through was carrying envoys for such a negotiation — but since that happened, the talks have broken down. There are a lot of desperate, patriotic extremists lurking on that planet, waiting to strike.”

“Terrorists, in fact.” Yume said frankly, and Washu nodded.

“Exactly that.” She agreed.

“So do we think this Nakabito guy is tied up with some half-crazy terrorist ring, then?” Ryoko frowned. “What’s in it for him, though, to attack the Earth?”

“I’ve got the distinct feeling that it’s not about that. Not really.” Washu sighed. “But I don’t understand... not yet, quite what all the details are. However, I think Yume is probably right to point out his origins. It’ll stand further investigation if nothing else.”

“Maybe the Earth are being drawn into Kanemitsu’s fight as an ally.” Yume suggested, and Ryoko snorted.

“The Earth is hardly geared up to be any kind of use to anyone.” She said disparagingly. “What the hell can the people here do? They can’t even defend themselves without Jurai giving them technological freebies. What use would they be to Kanemitsu?”

Washu faltered for a moment, staring at her daughter in consternation.

“Washu?” Yume frowned. “What’s wrong — you’ve gone pale?”

“The Earth.” Washu murmured, turning her gaze back to the screen as she re-read through Nakabito’s police file a second time. “I think that somehow, I need to get myself more involved with Ishida senior, and maybe find a way to meet this Nakabito myself. It’s just ocured to me... why they might want the Earth’s involvement.”

“But it’s like I said... what can the people of the Earth do in some high-tech political struggle?” Ryoko demanded, and Washu looked grim.

“They can die.” She said softly. “That’s what they can do, Ryoko.

They can die.”

So, it was here.

Suki stood at the window of her chamber, gazing out across the Juraian landscape towards the mausoleum where she knew her mother’s body would be consigned to her ancestors later that day. The ceremony would be solemn and dignified, with all the respect owed a lady of such standing and good reputation, and Suki knew that her mother would have approved of all the time and energy that had already been spent on preparing everything to perfection.

And yet, right at that moment, she wished that she could skip out on the whole thing and run free into the trees, away from the mourning robes and sober faces that would flank the walls of the memorial chamber as the Princess Sasami gave Kaede her final, eternal blessing.

“Will you be there with us, Okaasama?” She murmured, sighing as she rested her chin in her hands. “Are you waiting for that — for Sasami to send you to that place where souls don’t want for anything? Or are you already there, miles from Seiryō and I and any of Jurai’s concerns? I hope you are. You don’t need to worry about us... somehow, we’ll be strong enough to carry on without you. I just... I want today to be over. Especially for Seiryō’s sake... I want it to be over.”

She frowned, as her mind settled for a moment on her elder brother. He had not tried to return to the Council or his duties alongside Sasami since his conversation with Kiyone, but he had been distant since the Detective had left Jurai to return to Headquarters, and it troubled the young noblewoman more than she cared to admit.

“He’s so strong, but he’s not always strong.” She reflected aloud. “And I’ve seen him weak before. It scares me. When Father died — when all of those things happened, with Tokimi and the magic... I thought I might have lost him, then. He fought back — he found the strength somehow to do it. But this time... is different. Mother... is another matter. It’s not just a fight Seiryō’s carrying out within himself. It’s a bigger fight than that. The last time... I’m probably the only one who knows how close he came to losing that battle. This time... can he come to terms with Mother’s death by avoiding it as much as he has? He won’t talk to me, or to Tokimi. If he talked to Kiyone... I don’t know, but now she’s gone and he’s withdrawn again. I wish he wouldn’t do this — but he’s always been this way.”

She sighed, closing her eyes as a memory flooded her thoughts, taking her back to the last time she had seen her brother so raw and vulnerable to negative emotions. It had frightened her more than she had even admitted to herself, when she had come to realise that her brave, beloved elder brother was as human and as flawed beneath his confident demeanour as any other human — and that he too was capable of falling.

“Seiryō?”

Her own voice echoed through her thoughts as in her mind’s eye she saw herself stepping through the patio doors of the Tennan estate on another day so many months before and she sighed, burying her head in her hands as unbidden, the memories of a panicked young seventeen year old and the distant, strange figure of her brother standing silent and still beneath the branches of the old Camelia tree. A day so long ago, and yet, in Suki’s heart, she knew that the fears and the emotions were all too real. That the tension and rigidity in Seiryō’s body was no different than the strain that teased through him now, and deep down, Suki knew that above everything else it was this that she feared the most.

“Seiryō!”

Her brother was not facing her, and as she approached him, she noticed his sword was out of its scabbard, lying discarded on the ground beside him.

“Nii-chan, are you all right?” She asked softly, approaching him hesitantly and this time he turned to face her, a strange, haunted expression on his face. Suki opened her mouth to speak, but as she did so, she caught sight of the seeping red blood stain that marked her brother’s sleeve and horror sparked into her aquamarine eyes. With an exclamation, she grabbed at his wrist, pulling the injured arm towards her.

“Seiryō! What happened!”

“Leave me be, Suki!” Seiryō wrenched his arm away, defiance glittering in his tired eyes as he pushed her back. “It’s nothing. Just a scrape. I fumbled my sword, that’s all... the blade caught against my arm.”

Suki bit her lip, glancing from him to the sword on the ground, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then, slowly, she shook her head.

“That’s not true.” She whispered. “Nii-chan, your blade would flicker out the moment you stopped holding it. There’s no way it could have fallen against your arm in accident... no way at all.”

“Are you accusing me of lying?” Seiryō demanded, temper flaring in his

tone, and Suki swallowed hard, slowly nodding her head.

"I guess I am." She murmured. "But it doesn't make any sense. Let me see it, Seiryō... did you get attacked by something? Is that what you don't want to tell me? Is someone still on your case over the things that happened on Kihaku? Let me see your wound — at the very least, I can treat it."

Seiryō's expression became obstinate and he did not reply, putting his hurt arm behind his body as he shook his head.

"I am not such a child that I cannot take care of a scratch on my own." He said darkly. "I do not need your ministrations, Suki. I am perfectly able of taking care of myself."

Suki looked troubled, but she did not push the issue, bending to scoop up Seiryō's discarded sword instead. As she did so, she registered the blood that stained the hilt, and her eyes opened wide in dismay as she realised the source of the stain. She gazed up at him, new horror in her expression.

"Nii-chan." She whispered, holding the sword out, and Seiryō glanced at it, dashing it out of her hands as he shook his head.

"It needs to be cleaned. I don't want it." He said flatly. "Out of my way, Suki. I have things to which I must attend."

"No, Nii-chan." Suki summoned her courage, shaking her head as she grabbed her brother by the hand. "You're not going to brush this off and walk away. I'm sick of you trying to keep everything away from me, and it's not going to happen any longer. Do you hear me? You can't keep bottling things up. I'm not going to let you go until you tell me what's really going on!"

"Let me go, Suki!"

"Not a chance." Suki shook her head, resolution burning in her heart as she gazed up at him. "I told you before, I'm not going to let you deal with this alone. You're my brother, and I love you — more than anything I have. But you scare me — at the moment, you're scaring me more than you ever have. Don't you realise that?"

Despite himself, Seiryō faltered, and Suki nodded.

"I know you cut your arm and I think you did it on purpose." She said softly. "I don't see how it could have been an accidental blow, as you say it was. But I don't understand why you would do something so destructive. Nii-chan, please, talk to me. Explain."

Seiryō swallowed hard, and in that instant Suki realised how truly vulnerable her elder brother was. He bit his lip, sending her a look of anguish, and Suki sighed, leading him over to the bench and ushering him

down, sitting beside him.

"Talk to me." She said quietly. *"You know that of all people you can trust in my discretion."*

"You would not understand."

"Maybe not, but I can try. And it's better than you being alone." Suki bit her lip, then, *"Nii-chan, tell me the truth. Did you... were you trying... did you seek to end your life?"*

Seiryō looked stricken, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then, at length, he shook his head.

"I do not seek death." He said slowly. *"You must not think that I have given up, Suki. It is not so simple."*

"Then what?" Relief flickered in Suki's heart. *"Why would you hurt yourself?"*

Seiryō dropped his gaze.

"I have not slept in some days." He admitted. *"And such exhaustion brings with it dark thoughts and... and images. Hallucinations. Things beyond my control. I cannot get rest, Suki. I am too haunted by black thoughts and memories of what happened on Kihaku. It takes all my strength to suppress the negative emotions that want to overwhelm me when I am so tired as this. Sometimes they seek to break free. I... I suppose that, when it came over me, I just wished to make it stop. That... that perhaps, for an instant, I sought to bring oblivion. But I fought against it too, Suki. I am not such a man as to take my own life because of weakness."*

"You cut your arm to wake yourself from the delusion." Suki realised, and Seiryō nodded his head.

"As you say." He agreed wearily. *"Such a course of action is deplorable, I realise... but better than plunging the blade through my heart, which is what my exhaustion compelled me to do. You say you fear me, Suki, when I am this way — but you can't imagine how much I fear myself."*

"How long has this been happening?"

"I don't know. It is difficult to fight the changes in mood when I am rested, but without it is near impossible."

"And you're still having trouble sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Then it's time we sought help in that respect." Suki said reasonably. *"Some kind of serum or medicament that will help you. You can't continue*

this way — you are weaker than you have ever been before, and the scars of your experiences are able to take hold of you more easily. We must steady the balance.”

“False sleep is no sleep at all... and doesn’t help to defeat the demons.” Seiryō said bleakly. Suki shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter. Right now, you’re exhausted, and acting rashly.” She said evenly. “Whether you consider it failing in your willpower or not, I don’t care. This afternoon, when I pick up my mother’s remedies, I will collect a sleeping draft for you as well. So at the very least I can go to bed and not be afraid to find you dead when I wake up!”

Despite herself, her voice shook, and Seiryō bit his lip, sending her a guilty look.

“This is why I sought to conceal it from you.” He said heavily. “Because I knew it would upset you to know.”

Tears glittered on Suki’s lashes, and she shook her head, flinging her arms around her companion.

“You’re my brother.” She choked. “I love you more than anything. Nii-chan, don’t you realise that? That you’re not a bother to me — that having you here brings me joy, not trouble? Even unwell, even needing my help — we both know that in some respects I am to blame for your suffering... and I am not afraid to stand by you the way I assist mother. I would not shy away from it, not when you need my help. You have always been there for me, and I will be so for you. Besides, Seiryō, I have already lost my Father. Mother’s life hangs in the balance. I cannot lose you too... I cannot!”

With that she buried her head in his shoulder, the tears flowing, and with a sigh, Seiryō raised his good arm to stroke her hair.

“You are the one strand of sanity that keeps me bound to this world.” He said softly. “Believe me, Suki, without you, I would have come adrift a long time before. Sometimes, yes, things are difficult to handle. But I promise you, I will not scare you in this way any more. I will not harm myself, you have my word. No matter how evil the darkness becomes, I won’t let it win. You won’t lose your brother... I promise.”

“You promised.” Suki whispered, opening her eyes as she felt the coolness of tears on her cheeks. “But at the moment I can’t reach you — I feel like I’m losing you again, Seiryō. I know Mother was important to you — to us both. But I wish you’d share your pain with me. How can I help you, if you don’t reach out to me and confide? I don’t want you to hurt alone, Nii-chan — I don’t want you to get to that point again. You said then that I was the one thing that kept you

strong... but now... is that still true? Or is this too much pain even for you to handle?"

"Are you talking to yourself, Suki?"

His voice from the doorway startled her and she swung around, taking in his sober black and maroon robes and biting her lip. She shrugged her shoulders.

"I was just thinking." She admitted. "About... Mother."

"What else is there to think of, today?" Seiryō asked lightly, but Suki saw the anguish flickering in his teal gaze. "But we'll do it as she would have wanted. And Sasami-sama will come and give her blessing, too. It will all be fine, Suki. You'll see."

"It will." Suki agreed softly. "But Oniisama, what about *you*?"

"*Me*?" Seiryō looked startled, and Suki nodded.

"Will *you* be okay?" She whispered, and Seiryō eyed her for a moment, as if debating how to answer her question. At length he sighed, spreading his hands.

"What's to be done about it?" He asked helplessly. "Nothing in the world can bring her back. No, I wouldn't say I'm all right, Suki-chan. But I will live. No doubt, somehow, I will find a way to deal with this. Right now I will just carry on with ritual and not think too greatly on it. It is easier that way."

"Don't shut me out, Nii-chan." Suki said gently, resting her fingers on his arm. "We both share this pain... we both understand it better than anyone else can. Remember that, all right? I know how you like to pull away, but I don't want you to feel you have to protect me. It worries me more when you don't talk to me."

"I..." Seiryō looked guilty, then he shook his head.

"I suppose I'm not built for confidences." he admitted at length. "But you shouldn't worry about me. We all deal with loss in our own way. This is a new sensation for me, after all. I never grieved for Father. But I do... for Mother."

He smiled bitterly.

"You come to realise that loving someone so much is a dangerous business." He added. "Because losing them is a worse pain than anything I've experienced in battle."

"True." Suki leant up against him with a sigh. "But that doesn't mean you *shouldn't* love those people, Nii-chan. Don't pull away from

Tokimi and I, all right? We are family. And we'll get through it together."

"I suppose we will." Seiryō glanced down at her, and Suki was relieved to see a flicker of something beyond pain in his gaze. "Thank you, Suki. I know I have you both. I just... am not ready... yet. That's all."

"I suppose that's fair." Suki said reflectively. "But when you are, you know we're both here. All right?"

"All right."

"It's a shame Kiyone wasn't able to stay for the ceremony, you know."

"Kiyone?" Suki felt her brother tense, and she gazed at him in consternation.

"Oniisama?" She murmured. "Did you... is something wrong?"

"No." Seiryō gathered his wits, shaking his head. "Nothing at all. Kiyone was kind, in coming — but she has duties to follow and she had to go back to Headquarters. It would not have been fair to keep her here."

He offered a rueful smile.

"Besides, she nags me more than you do... perhaps my brain is glad of the space."

"I don't know." Suki frowned. "She seemed... to bring you peace, in some way. That having someone unconnected to everything was good for you."

"Maybe." Seiryō acknowledged. "But she is gone now. And I will be quite all right, Suki. Really. I see what you're thinking, and I understand your concerns. But I am not so unsteady in my composure to do anything desperate or rash. I am in control of myself, and I will not cause a scene at the memorial this afternoon. Not even if Takeru does make good on his request to come."

"I'm glad about that." Suki agreed. "All right. I should finish getting ready. Is Tokimi about?"

"Yes." Seiryō nodded. "She's in the grounds, picking flowers for her hair. Something to do with respect for the dead. I didn't pry too much — Tokimi's ways are unique and today isn't a good day for me to try to decipher them."

"She is a comfort though, isn't she?" Suki murmured, and Seiryō

smiled faintly, nodding his head.

“She is.” He said evenly. “I’m glad she’s here.”

He eyed her keenly for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll see you downstairs.” He said. “Don’t take too long — I want to walk out that way before the ceremony and ensure all is in final order before anyone else arrives.”

“All right.” Suki promised. “I only need to finish doing my hair, anyway. I won’t be long, Seiryō, so wait, all right? The three of us will go together.”

She smiled sadly.

“As a family should.”

Seiryō met her gaze, then he nodded.

“As a family should.” He echoed. “I will wait.”

Then he was gone, and Suki sighed, rubbing her temples.

“I wish I was as confident about his state of mind as he seems to be.” She muttered. “But at least he talked to me... a little bit. And I suppose, if he’s not ready to confide yet... I have to give him that time. It’s just frustrating. How can he move on if he won’t let himself get it out of his system? Mother, I wish I had you to ask advice of... I don’t know what to do with him, and that’s the truth!”

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

Well, she was as prepared as she was going to be.

Kiyone reached across to switch off the electronic video playback, getting to her feet as her gaze flitted across Yagami's cockpit to the digital clock that glittered the time and date exact to the nearest millisecond. With a sigh she ran her fingers through her thick dark hair, composing herself as she reviewed in her mind the kind of interview she was going into. Her meeting with Seiryō's former colleagues flitted through her mind and she frowned, determination flickering into her expression as she steadied her resolve.

"We'll find out if Nakabito is the kind of man we can trust or if he isn't." She muttered fiercely. "I just wish I didn't feel so damn scared. Facing up to an Elite who's using his position — possibly — to do dangerous stuff is a situation I've been in before and it cuts just a little close to my memory. However..."

She sighed, closing her eyes as she remembered Seiryō's tears within the Tennan family shrine.

"However, that was different." She reminded herself. "Seiryō was under a spell. There's no evidence of that so far this time. Even then, even when I was spying for Washu, I knew that something was up with him. That he wasn't acting right. This is another matter. And my job is to act in the name of justice, even if it's dangerous. Mihoshi isn't here to get me into trouble or hold me back — so I'm all set. I know my piece — come on, Kiyone. Let's get this show on the road."

With that she pushed back the door purposefully, heading down the corridor towards the divide that separated the main division from the Elite annexe. It had been some time indeed since the last time she had crossed this territory, for when she had dropped in on Imaguchi's workspace she had taken a different route, but as she stepped into the central control room, several of the technicians raised their hands in waves and despite herself, Kiyone felt a little more confident. She returned the smiles, coming up to the main desk with a grin.

"It's been a while." One woman commented. "Please tell me this isn't a Mihoshi alert, Kiyone-san."

"No... I promise." Kiyone laughed, shaking her head. "I've an

appointment with one of the agents. That's all."

"An appointment, huh?" One of the men looked interested. "Top secret assignment?"

"Nothing so interesting, I'm afraid." Kiyone pulled a face, hoping that they could not hear her heart pounding against her ribs. "It's just a review... one of those boring meetings about statistics. I've been elected by the department to represent our wing — that's all. It's going to be a yawn."

"Well, good luck with that." The woman laughed. "And you know, so long as you're not here to announce a disaster on the part of your partner, you're always welcome to stop and chat with us anytime."

"I know." Kiyone agreed. She hesitated, then, "Hey, one thing, before I go to my sleep-fest of a meeting?"

"Yes?" The man put his chin in his hands, eying her curiously.

"Seiryō Tennan doesn't work here any more, does he?"

"Tennan-san?" The woman looked startled, shaking her head. "No. He quit the force quite some time ago — has it really been that long since you were here last, Kiyone-san?"

"No, but I hadn't given it a thought till today." Kiyone said with a shrug. "I wondered what had happened to him — I thought he was something of a bigshot in this area. He just suddenly upped and quit? Why'd he do a thing like that?"

"Noone really knows for sure." The man sighed, spreading his hands. "He's a Juraian — Lord knows they work in mysterious ways. I guess something better came up on his homeworld. I have heard stories that he's some bigwig at the court there now — no doubt that's it. Blueblooded ties."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot that he was noble born." Kiyone pursed her lips. "I guess that's it, then. Though it's a blow for the Police, right? I mean, wasn't he one of the top Elite, once upon a time?"

"Yes. It means there's a vacancy in the division, actually." The woman eyed her keenly. "Is that why you're asking, Kiyone-san? Thinking of applying for your pips at last?"

"What do you suppose Mihoshi'd do, if I became an Elite?" Kiyone laughed, shaking her head. "Besides, I'm not sure I'm cut out for the stress of it all, to be honest. From all I've heard, it's a pretty heavy job."

“Depends on the Agent, I guess.” The woman shrugged. “But you’d not be out of place — I know a lot of the Elites know your name, Kiyone-san — I’m sure the Commander wouldn’t object, either, if you decided to step up a rank or two. Mihoshi’s muddles are her own to worry about — you should be thinking of your own career a little, too.”

“Perhaps.” Kiyone frowned, and for a moment she was silent. “So I guess Tennan-san’s office quarters are vacant now, huh?”

“Yeah. Tempting, huh — considering that he had the biggest stretch of space going.” The man teased her. Kiyone laughed ruefully, shaking her head.

“I don’t have aspirations of grandeur.” She said playfully. “I’m fine where I am. Really. It was just a curiosity... that’s all.”

“Well, take care where that curious mind leads you, huh, Kiyone?” The woman became serious at that point, and Kiyone cast her a surprised look.

“What’s that meant to mean?” She asked softly, and the woman frowned.

“Well... I shouldn’t say this, seeing as it’s just rumour.” She said uneasily. “And that it’s about a former Elite and all — but there are rumours that Tennan quit the Elite because of something he did — something Jurai are hushing up. The rumours give it that he assaulted some woman or other... some of them are a touch above the law, if you give them a bit of power and influence. I don’t know if it’s true, you know — and I know you won’t go repeating it indiscriminately. But just... it’s not always a good idea to ask too many questions in this area. They’re a private, strange breed, the Elite... keep it in mind, huh?”

“For sure.” Kiyone’s expression became serious. “If it’s that way. I appreciate the warning — and I’m glad I’m only here to discuss statistics. Hey, I’ll see you, all right? I’m going to be late, and that won’t impress anyone!”

She raised her hand in a wave, hurrying away down the corridors behind before either of her colleagues could raise any more questions. As she ran, her mind buzzed with what she had learnt.

“So even though the incident was hushed up, rumours still spread.” She murmured. “They don’t know it was me he attacked, or why... but that he left in some form of controversy, that seems to be the tale going around. I wonder if that’s an accident... or deliberate. More

dissatisfaction against Jurai and their methods? Agin the law... that kind of attitude is going to put people's backs up, if they already think Jurai has too much of a stranglehold on Galaxy Police politics. The Elite are dangerous if they get out of hand, huh? No kidding!"

At that moment she reached her destination and for a moment she paused, gazing up at the neat metal nameplate that glittered on the plain steel door.

"Junichi Nakabito." She read softly, then she took a deep breath. "Right. Here... here goes."

She raised her hand, knocking sharply on the metal, and with a hiss the door slid back, revealing a brightly lit, tidy workspace. In the centre, sat at the room's only desk was a young man of about Seiryo's age, dark hair pulled back from his face in a tail and as she hesitated, he glanced up, offering her a warm smile as he beckoned for her to enter. Startled by the friendliness in his dark eyes, Kiyone did as she was bidden, stepping into the office and taking the proffered seat as she heard the door hiss softly back behind her, cutting off any escape.

She swallowed hard, eying her companion carefully, and as she met his gaze once more, his smile widened.

"Detective Makibi." He said amiably. "Thank you for coming — I know it was short notice and I'm sure you have a heavy workload of your own already to deal with. It's good of you to come and help me with mine... I trust you had no trouble finding your way?"

"No, sir." Kiyone shook her head, finding herself relaxing in such an unintimidating, relaxed atmosphere. "No trouble at all, thanks to your map. Although I was curious about the nature of your summons. It all sounded very cryptic — not at all like the stuff I'm usually involved in. I'm not in any kind of trouble, sir, am I?"

"No, of course not." Nakabito laughed, shaking his head. "Nothing like that. I'm sorry — I suppose it does seem cloak and dagger. The truth is that I didn't want to risk anyone else overhearing my message and drawing unwelcome information from it. Involving a Regular in the business of Elites is risky and it's created dangerous situations before — so I didn't want to make you a target."

He grinned ruefully, rubbing his chin as he eyed her sheepishly.

"Also, I suppose, in my line of work, it's easy to become overly cautious." He acknowledged. "My expertise is in surveillance espionage, and in such a situation it's impossible not to imagine someone's listening in."

Despite herself, Kiyone returned the smile.

“I suppose so.” She agreed. “But it’s a relief to know I’m not here because you think I’ve done something I shouldn’t. I haven’t been to the Elite quarters for quite some time, to be honest with you — it was strange to come here again.”

“I’ve spoken to the Commander about you.” Nakabito admitted, and Kiyone’s eyes opened wide.

“About... me?” She echoed, and Nakabito nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed. “Or rather, not in such blatant terms. But you are probably aware that there’s a vacant position in the Elite at the moment. In conversation about that, your name did come up a couple of times. Though he seemed to think you weren’t looking to advance your career. Your case history is impressive, however — I’m surprised to hear that you’re satisfied as a Regular.”

“I... don’t want to be an Elite.” Kiyone eyed him in confusion. “It’s just not... something I want to do right at the moment.”

Nakabito eyed her for a moment, and Kiyone was sure she could see comprehension flit across his gaze. He nodded slowly.

“I see.” He said gently. “I imagine not. I’m sorry... perhaps I’m insensitive, bringing you here in this way. It hadn’t occurred to me that there might still be scars — but even so, I need your help.”

“Scars?” Now Kiyone was completely bewildered. “Agent Nakabito, I don’t understand.”

“Seiryō Tennan.” Nakabito said frankly, and Kiyone’s eyes opened wide in surprise. “Yes, I’m afraid I know all about that ugly little incident, Detective. Considering what passed between you, I’m sure that the very idea of the Elite must disgust you. But we’re not all of the ilk that Agent Tennan is — I should say, was, since he is no longer one of us.”

“I... I know. He’s gone back to... to Jurai.” Kiyone gathered herself. “But... why is that...”

“I’ll be straight with you.” Nakabito rested his chin in his hands. “Of late, I’ve become concerned — very concerned — about certain activity on Jurai. Although the Emperor claims independent jurisdiction, technically Jurai and its dependants still come under some Galaxy Police authority. That means that in cases of criminal activity that may extend beyond Jurai’s boundaries, we are entitled — no, expected — to play some part in the investigation. However, Jurai

is not an easy planet to work with. I don't know if you're aware, but the hearing that you attended on Jurai was nothing more than a show-trial — and that Tennan was never formally charged under Galaxy Police law for his acts in space. However, this is becoming something of a situation. The Earth — I believe you are somewhat familiar with that planet and its surrounds — still remains in a protected space zone, and because of this, the Emperor of Jurai is in breach of Galaxy Peace codes. By protecting Seiryō Tennan from an official Police tribunal, he's effectively saying that the Galaxy Police have no authority. The situation has always been unsettled, but in recent weeks... more disturbing events have begun to occur."

"I see." Kiyone's mind raced. "So A..Agent Tennan should have been arrested by the Galaxy Police, and not by Jurai at all?"

"Yes." Nakabito confirmed. "And charged by us, too. And this probably wouldn't have become such a big deal, except that in recent months Jurai has become even more powerful by allying with Airai. You must realise that several of the planetary areas we oversee are getting jittery about such a bold move. Airai and Jurai have been enemies for generations, and now they're suddenly batting for the same team. Because of this, I and certain other agents of the Division have been assigned to investigate... and discover breaches of space conduct if and where we can. Unfortunately, we've been uncovering just that."

He frowned, chewing on his lip.

"A man was arrested on Jurai a few days ago — ostensibly for spying, although there's been no firm evidence of it." He added. "The man was never formally charged, but he was discovered dead in his cell in mysterious circumstances. Considering the security planets such as Jurai practice, it seems unlikely that it would have been possible for him to have killed himself. The other option is that he was killed by order. From my sources, the man was of Kanemitsu extraction — and the relationships between Kanemitsu and Jurai have been ever rockier since an unfortunate breakdown in negotiations between the two planets. Kanemitsu are afraid that Jurai are looking to stifle them once and for all. And that they won't be the only planet to suffer, either, from the force of this new alliance. Several planetary bodies have appealed the police for help. And that is where my headache comes in."

He grimaced ruefully.

"Playing referee for feuding planets is like keeping charge of a playground full of angry schoolchildren." He admitted. "But

unfortunately, it's one of the responsibilities we face. And in light of that... I've been forced to unlock and review every single potential breach of space code over the past few years. Tennan-san's file has landed on my desk — and your name came up as a result of it."

Kiyone let out her breath in a rush.

"Then I'm doubly glad not to be an Elite." She murmured. "It does sound like a headache to unravel."

"Which is why I'm hoping you'll take pity on my sanity and help me pick this one apart." Nakabito said frankly, and despite herself, Kiyone laughed, nodding her head.

"Yes sir." She agreed playfully. "If I can. But I'm not sure how I can. I mean, if you've read my testimony — what else is there to say?"

"You were discharged from the force for a period of time following this incident with yourself and Agent Tennan, weren't you?" Nakabito asked softly, and Kiyone's eyes opened wide as slowly she nodded her head.

"Yes, but it wasn't for very long." She agreed. "I... I had... I was all right, really."

"Post traumatic stress is what the official record says." Nakabito told her, and Kiyone flushed red, shaking her head.

"That's an overstatement." She said firmly. "It wasn't that bad. It just took me a little while to get the whole thing out of my head. But I did, and I'm fine now. I'm not scared by it any more."

"I'm glad about that." Nakabito offered her a smile. "Because I was hoping you'd tell me in your own words what happened between you aboard that spaceship. Remember, this isn't just your justice we're talking about here. It's about the adherence to Intergalactic Space Law. I understand that's a subject close to your heart — protecting the people who can't protect themselves."

Kiyone eyed him for a moment, then nodded.

"Of course. Like all Galaxy Police." She said evenly. "But what more can I tell you?"

"Unfortunately my records are somewhat incomplete." Nakabito admitted. "So it would be a great help just to hear it in your own words."

"I think my memory is a little incomplete also." Kiyone confessed. "I... I was in a coma after the incident, you know. I don't remember..."

everything about it, even now. It's a bit hazy in my mind... I was quite lucky to even survive. If not for the help of..."

She faltered, biting her lip, and Nakabito eyed her keenly.

"Help of...?" He prompted, and Kiyone reddened.

"I don't want to bring anyone into trouble because of me." She said falteringly, and Nakabito smiled.

"But I'm not the enemy, am I?" He asked gently. "And you're not a suspect. You're a victim. Anyone who helped you is hardly about to be arraigned, are they?"

"No, but..."

"Detective, I appreciate your sense of loyalty, but this is important." Nakabito said softly, a sense of urgency flickering in his dark eyes. "People have died. People may continue to die. This might be more significant than you realise — please. Whatever you know, whatever you can tell me. I promise to treat it with the utmost sensitivity, however..."

He trailed off, and Kiyone sighed.

"Washu Hakubi." She said softly. "A friend of mine, who treated my injuries almost immediately after I received them. Thanks to her I survived the assault."

"*Professor* Hakubi?" Nakabito's eyes widened, and Kiyone nodded.

"You... know about her?"

"Her name is also in my file, although unfortunately most of her testimony isn't. I suppose you've just explained her presence and involvement in all this to me." Nakabito smiled. "Please. Go on."

"Washu won't get into trouble, will she?"

"Believe me, she's not any kind of a suspect in anything." Nakabito assured her. "As I said, my investigation is into breaches of space law. You and she haven't committed any such infractions, so why would you get into any trouble? It's just important to understand all the pieces... that's all."

"I see." Kiyone eyed him doubtfully, then, "What else do you want to know?"

"What you remember aboard the spaceship. If you don't mind. What Tennan said to you — what happened that evening."

"Like I said, it's not entirely clear." Kiyone twisted her fingers

together as she struggled to regain control of the conversation. "But I think... he was... strange. Stoned, or crazy, or under some kind of spell. I'm pretty sure that it was the last of those. That some kind of being had put him under a spell and that compelled him to assault me in the way he did. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"And you heard something you shouldn't?" Nakabito asked. Kiyone stared, and Nakabito rummaged in a file on his desk, pulling out a typed statement.

"They did talk about his father's death. I thought at the time that maybe Lord Seiryō had... had been involved in killing him and that he was trying to cover it up. He made it pretty clear that he... well... that he and his father weren't very close."

He read aloud, and Kiyone's eyes widened in disbelief. Nakabito smiled.

"Your words, I think?" He asked softly, pushing the sheet towards her, and numbly she took it, running her gaze over the sheet as she read her own testimony in black and white. Slowly she nodded.

"Yes." She agreed. "I guess that is what I overheard."

She frowned, touching her finger to the lines beneath.

"But as you can see, I didn't know anything about it then and I don't now." She added. "All his attack did was convince me that he was crazy — not that he killed his father or anything of the sort. I don't think he did kill his father, Agent Nakabito. I think if he had, he was mad enough at the time to have told me so in no uncertain terms. But he didn't. He took the time to deny it. So whatever did happen to Lord Seiji, I don't think Agent Tennan was involved. Nor have I really thought about it again since, to be truthful."

"I suppose not." Nakabito acknowledged. "I'm sorry. This is very out of the blue for you, isn't it? Something I imagine you thought was behind you — correct?"

"Yes." Kiyone nodded. "Decidedly."

"I wish it could be — for me as well." Nakabito admitted. "It's turning into a complicated investigation and I need so much more than I have at present. The honest truth is, Kiyone-san, that I believe that something else is brewing. I know about Jurai's alliance with the planet known as Earth. And it concerns me. The man who died in custody, and all of the secrecy that surrounds that Empire... I think that the Earth is in very grave danger. I've heard reports of dangerous new weaponry being developed there in secret without the patent or

approval of the Science Academy, and that the Earth has Juraian defences worries me rather. I don't like the way my thoughts are heading, but I think that considering the existing breaches of space law, Jurai may be planning on harming the Earth."

"Harming the..."

"Yes." Nakabito confirmed. "And between the two of us, I don't want that to happen."

He looked troubled.

"My father was born on the Earth." He admitted. "And I don't want to see it destroyed."

"Your father." Kiyone breathed, and Nakabito nodded.

"He was a stranded space pilot that was rescued by a passing transport." He agreed. "From one of the crackbrained experiments the Earth have done over the years. But backwards as they are, they still are a part of me, too... I want to be able to protect the people there, if I can. It's a tall order — and it worries me."

Kiyone's brows knitted together as she digested this.

"I wish I could tell you more." She admitted. "I don't remember enough to be much clearer. He came aboard my spaceship, he attacked me and I almost died. I testified for the Emperor and was assured that it was all resolved now — that the matter would be dealt with and so would Agent Tennan. Since then..."

She shrugged.

"It's been past." She admitted.

"You were once stationed on Earth too, Detective Makibi?"

"Yes... a long time ago." Kiyone looked surprised. Nakabito nodded.

"I thought so." He reflected. "So you understand why I want to protect it?"

"Definitely, but..."

"I may need to count on that support, if it gets more serious than it already is." Nakabito owned. "I hope not. I don't want to involve a Regular in such risky operations. But even so, I think you could handle it."

"What do you want me to do, Agent Nakabito?"

“Well, first, I’d really like to speak to your friend Washu.” Nakabito responded. “And then... then I suppose we’ll see how things pan out. If there are people on the Earth who trust you, I may need you to go there for me... but for now, I think, contact with Professor Hakubi is top of my list. I’ve heard a lot of things about her, but only rumour, not much fact.”

“I... I’ll contact her and speak to her on your behalf, if you want me to.” Kiyone agreed, and Nakabito smiled.

“That would help.” He nodded. “Thank you. I appreciate that. And your discretion, too, Detective... this is a highly delicate matter and I’m afraid not all of the Agents in the division are people I can trust.”

“No...” Kiyone bit her lip, and Nakabito smiled at her.

“But you know that, after your experiences.” He admitted. “Those who have ties to Jurai may have their own interests to protect — just be careful, okay? I don’t want anything to happen to you because I told you these things.”

“I will be very careful.” Kiyone promised, getting to her feet. “And I’ll do what I can, about Washu.”

She bowed her head, then withdrew from the office, pausing in the corridor outside to gather her thoughts.

“Dammit, even with Agent Imaguchi and Agent Takamura’s preparation advice, he was tough going.” She reflected. “And the trouble is... do I believe him? He seems... nice enough. Honest enough. When he said... about his father... but was it all... real? Or was he... is he the enemy here? I’m so confused.”

She rubbed her temples, shaking her head as if to clear it.

“I’m on Seiryō’s side.” She murmured. “But... the Earth, Jurai, all these things... who’s telling me the truth? I want to trust someone... and I’m muddled now. But... I promised Sasami I would help her, too. And Jurai. So I guess that decides me, doesn’t it? So long as there’s no truth in Jurai wanting to attack the Earth. I can’t believe there is, but he seemed so sincere. I guess... he is a pro. And dangerous, too, if he’s not on the level. I have to tread carefully.”

She frowned.

“Should I have mentioned Washu?” She wondered. “She can take care of herself, no doubt about that. And it can’t hurt, if she’s aware... at least if she meets him, she’ll know if she can trust him or if she can’t. That would help. But she might not like that I gave her name.

Still... I don't think this is something I can do entirely on my own. If Agent Nakabito is an enemy — I think he's potentially a very dangerous one to have!"

"You know, there are more sensitive ways of approaching situations than this, Hideki."

As they stepped off the transport bug, Agent Takamura shot his partner a rueful smile, reaching up absently to adjust the collar of his shirt as his companion sealed the craft, cloaking it from view. "Is there really any point in us coming back to Jurai so soon after our last visit? You know what the Emperor — and Lord Takeru — have both said. We're not going to get within an inch of Seiryō, let alone be able to ask him any leading questions. Aren't we just wasting time?"

"Wasting time?" Imaguchi sent his companion an innocent smile. "You misunderstand our purpose, Ryou-kun. We're here because the mother of a good friend of ours has passed away and it would be insensitive not to pay our respects. Wouldn't it?"

"Are you kidding me?" Takamura's eyes widened. "Hideki, you aren't seriously considering gatecrashing the Tennan memorial, are you?"

"Gatecrashing is such a crude term." Imaguchi reflected. "I thought a flying visit might be nice, that's all. Considering the occasion."

"You have any idea what will happen if the Emperor finds out?" Takamura demanded. "Hideki, listen to me. This planet is a powerful force and we both know it. Even if we are trying to act to Seiryō's advantage, we've been told the official position and if we try too hard to undermine that, our own situations are on the line, too. Even if Nakabito is involved in the things we think he might be — even if there is something huge on its way — if we annoy the Emperor of Jurai we'll find a lot more doors closed to us than have already been. It's too big a gamble... we can't afford to lose Jurai's goodwill at the moment!"

"What goodwill?" Imaguchi snorted, shaking his head. "You stick to picking apart your corpses for clues, Ryou, and leave the manipulation of witnesses to me. We've not been able to see Seiryō since this all began — people have kept him well out of our way. But if we accidentally happened to bump into him, we might well find he doesn't mind a quick chat with a couple of old Academy buddies. You know what I mean? And besides, we are his friends... aren't we? That wouldn't make our presence here inappropriate in the least."

“Seiryō is such a strange kind of a man to call a friend.” Takamura sighed. “Yes, I suppose, but even so, neither of us have ever met his family.”

“Which is a shocking oversight on our part.” Imaguchi said frankly. “And it’s about time we rectified it, don’t you think so?”

“Hideki!”

“Are you really willing to just turn and walk away?” Imaguchi demanded. “Look, Ryou. Kiyone-san is meeting with Nakabito at about now. After that, we’ll know if she’s on his side or ours pretty quickly — and you know how persuasive a person Nakabito is. I’d quite like to learn a little bit more about why she’s so keen to help Seiryō out, too. It’s not that I don’t believe her — I do, she’s a very credible individual. But I like to know all the players and their parts before I get too deeply involved in something. If you don’t want to come to the memorial, that’s fine. You don’t have to. Go speak to Azusa-sama and keep him busy, or something, with some irrelevance or other about that spy’s autopsy report. Leave the other stuff to me.”

“That might be better.” Takamura admitted. “Although... are you sure you’re not going to get us into trouble?”

“Who is it who’s spent the best part of ten years infiltrating terrorist splinter groups and getting information out of hard-nosed extremists?” Imaguchi demanded. “Have some faith, will you? I’m not a rookie.”

“No, but this isn’t terrorist extremists. This is Jurai.” Takamura said ruefully. “And that being the case, Hide, I consider them a lot more dangerous. Your family are Seniwan — but mine are essentially Juraian in their government and everything else. I don’t want to bring anyone’s wrath down on Yubisu and my family because we overstepped the mark.”

“When you talk like that I wonder whether your heart is really in this.” Imaguchi eyed him critically, and Takamura sighed, spreading his hands.

“I don’t like the fact that innocent people are going to get hurt, if indeed that’s what’s going to happen.” He said at length. “My personal politics regarding Jurai and the Imperial Throne are secondary — Yubisu’s interests are separate from the Galaxy Police and while I’m in uniform, I’m not acting as their advocate.”

“Even if this underground plot should create the opportunity for Yubisu’s independance, too?”

“Yubisu is not sound enough economically to survive without Jurai.

The planet would go into meltdown.” Takamura said simply. “And Kanemitsu — even though many of them don’t realise it — are probably the same way. They don’t realise how much they rely on Juraian trade treaties and embargos to boost their industry and their standard of living — so don’t worry about it, Hideki. I’m not going to join the rebel cause just yet. But it doesn’t mean I don’t think sometimes Azusa-heika and his government control too much space.”

“That’s not our problem at the moment.” Imaguchi reflected. “But all right. I’ll trek my way to the Tennan mausoleum — I think I have a hazy idea where I’m going from the ship’s scanners. You see what else you can discover... and we’ll meet back at the ship in two hours from now. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” Takamura nodded. “But be careful, huh? I know you when you have an idea — don’t rush in and leave me to pick up the pieces.”

“No loyalty, that’s your trouble.” Imaguchi returned, and Takamura pulled a face at him, before pulling his cloak more tightly around his body, disappearing over the rise in the direction of the palace.

“Sometimes he’s far too cautious for his own good.” Imaguchi reflected to himself as he made his own way down towards the dip in the horizon where the Tennan family’s mausoleum was situated. “I suppose that’s what comes of growing up under Juraian domination... from that perspective, I do know what he means. However... this is important, too. And it’s frustrating that it’s not like Seiryō has told us point blank to leave him alone. He doesn’t even know we want to speak to him... I can’t abide that.”

As he reached the clearing that led to the mausoleum, he registered that there were a crowd of people outside it and he cursed, realising that he was too late and that the service itself had already ended. From where he stood, his sharp eyes could pick out tears on the cheeks of some of the mourners, and he frowned, narrowing his gaze as he sought out his former Academy friend in the midst of the black and maroon. At first he could not see him, but then, as he focused his attention harder he made out the tall, distinct form standing a little way away from the mass, staring up at the mausoleum as if contemplating some deep and meaningful thought.

Imaguchi’s brows knitted together as he interpreted the expression on the nobleman’s face.

“Do not disturb.” He muttered. “Well, buddy, no can do, I’m sorry. We have more pressing matters and whether you care or not about

your mother's death, I have to ask you a few questions."

He pursed his lips, scanning the rest of the crowd for the Emperor or any of his associates, and a smile touched his lips as he realised that the King of Jurai had not been in attendance.

"Nor is Lord Haru, the sly old weasel." He murmured. "Takeru... I see Lord Takeru, but he's far enough from Seiryō to mark out the course of a river between them without either one of them falling in. I wonder if there's a rivalry there I don't know about — it wouldn't surprise me, knowing my old friend's temperament. Still, that's a byline for the time being. My target is Seiryō himself, for now."

As he made his way casually down the slope, he was suddenly aware of eyes on him and he paused, glancing up in some confusion as he met the sober crimson gaze of a young girl not far into her teens. Dressed in the same formal black and maroon as her associates, with her thick hair bound back from her face, it was almost possible to see the woman lurking within the child, and despite himself Imaguchi hesitated, unsure.

At his faltering, the girl smiled, bowing her head as she held out her hands in the traditional Juraian greeting, and at length, Hideki found his words.

"Lady Sasami." He murmured, inwardly cursing his luck and wondering, for the briefest of instants, whether he might be able to talk his way past Jurai's Goddess. Although she was already becoming pretty, in the tradition of Juraian Princesses, she did not seem overly prepossessing or intimidating, and he bit his lip, debating his chances.

"Agent Imaguchi." Sasami spoke in soft tones, and Imaguchi looked startled at the use of his name. "That is right, isn't it? You are Hideki Imaguchi, from the Galaxy Police?"

"Yes, Hime." Imaguchi gathered his wits, offering her a smile as he belatedly returned her gesture of greeting. "Forgive me... I wasn't expecting to speak to you."

"Have you come to pay respects to Lady Kaede?" Sasami asked curiously. "Or is it just to see Seiryō that you've come here, Agent Imaguchi?"

"A little of both, my Lady." Imaguchi admitted. "Seiryō was an old friend of mine, you know — back in Academy days."

"Yes, so I believe you told my Lord Uncle and my brother in law." Suddenly something about the young girl seemed to have changed, as a new resolve glittered in her crimson eyes. Imaguchi stared at her in

confusion for a moment, then he registered the movement of his old friend out of the corner of his eye and he realised with a jolt of triumph that he had succeeded in attracting Seiryō's attention.

"So then you'll understand my wish to speak to an old friend." He said now, and Sasami inclined her head slightly.

"Yes, of course." She agreed lightly. "If that's all it is, Agent, I'm glad you're here. It's a difficult time for the Tennan family, after all."

"Hideki?" At that moment Seiryō joined them, staring at Imaguchi in confusion and disbelief. "What are you doing here... on Jurai... on today of all days?"

"Passing on his condolences to your family, I think, Seiryō." Sasami said softly, and Imaguchi, who had been about to greet his friend with the suggestion of some time away from the melee suddenly realised that he had underestimated the Princess's understanding of the situation. She slipped her arm into Seiryō's now, offering the Agent a dazzling smile that flickered with just enough meaning to tell him that whatever he had planned to try that afternoon, he would be better off not attempting it in her presence. For a moment, even the confident Imaguchi was cowed by the sudden flare of the Goddess in the young girl's eyes. Then, just as quickly, it was gone, and he was left wondering whether or not he had imagined it.

"Passing on..." Seiryō frowned, eying his companion keenly. "I see. Well... then I suppose I must thank you, although I admit I... I didn't expect to see you here."

"And clearly I've chosen an inappropriate day to make a house call." Imaguchi reflected, bowing his head in acknowledgement of his friend's words. "A flying visit, that's all."

"It was kind." Sasami said warmly. "And I'm sure Lady Kaede appreciates it too, Agent Imaguchi."

She bowed her head towards him, then, "I'm sorry, but I need Seiryō to come with me right now. I want to offer proper blessing to Kaede-sama in Tsunami's own chapel and I'd like him to be with me, when I do."

"Tsunami's..." Imaguchi eyed the young girl, and Sasami nodded her head.

"Yes." She agreed benignly. "It was nice to see you, Agent Imaguchi. Seiryō, lets find Suki and all go together — I'd like you both to be there, for Kaede-sama's sake, when I do this."

“Oh... yes.” Seiryō stared at his young mistress in confusion, but shrugged, nodding his head. “If that’s the way you want to do it, Hime. For my mother’s sake, I’ll follow your instructions — you know that this isn’t my area of expertise.”

“You just need to open your mind a little. That’s all.” Suddenly the Princess was the playful, teasing teenager again, and Imaguchi eyed her warily. “Bye, Agent Imaguchi... thank you again for coming to pay your respects to Lady Kaede!”

With that she led her companion merrily away towards the royal shrine, and Hideki sank back against the trunk of a tree, cursing under his breath.

“Lady Sasami.” He muttered. “Underestimating Jurai’s Goddess... smart move, Hide. Not. Oh well. That’s a dead end, anyway. She knew exactly why I was there, and that’s significant. Because Seiryō obviously didn’t. And he’s a smarter agent than that — if he knew anything about this business he’d have suspected a connection immediately. So they really are keeping him in the dark. Because of his mother’s death? Maybe... I suppose he did look a little strained and tired. Still, even so...”

He sighed, spreading his hands.

“I wonder what luck Ryou’s had — if any.” He mused. “Perhaps he was right after all — although I’ll never admit it to him. Even though we’re trying to help Jurai, they still have their own agenda first and foremost. It almost makes you want to become rebellious, when the Royal House are acting like this!”

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

They were almost ready to bloom.

Tokimi stood back, admiring the bright greens of the plants' foliage as she gently fingered the tips of the tiny buds which protruded from several of the stems. A smile touched her lips and she nodded her head in satisfaction, brushing her hands absently on the fabric of her skirt as she did so.

"Flowers for Nii-chan and Kiyo-neesan." She murmured. "Happy flowers. Tokimi is sure... flowers make Nii-chan happy again. Tokimi knows... if Nii-chan tells Kiyo-neesan... Nii-chan should not be alone. So, Tokimi chooses flowers that will help. On all Jurai, Tokimi is sure... these flowers will bring Nii-chan happiness."

She folded her fingers together, walking along the pathway towards the bushes at the furthest end, which were already splashed with bright colours as the flowers lifted their heads up to the sun. This area of Jurai land was, in effect, wild terrain, although in many ways it was as neatly and perfectly laid out as any private garden, and away from the confines of the Tennan estate, there was nowhere that Tokimi felt more at home. Flowers of all colours and styles bloomed all year round, and with her deep-rooted faith in the power of their blossoms, she had found it a source of both reassurance and respite over the time she had lived on Jurai.

"Almost like Kihaku." She reflected now, as she carefully selected the best flowers, picking them gently so as not to hurt the plant more than she had to. "Thank you to you, mother plant. Your flowers for Kaede-sama's memorial — I know she will be glad to have them."

"They're certainly very pretty."

A voice startled her and she swung around, almost dropping her precious burden in her surprise. At her reaction, the stranger held up his hands, offering her a rueful smile.

"I'm sorry." he said contritely. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's all right." Tokimi eyed him for a moment, her brow furrowed as she tried to work out who he was. He was dressed in familiar blues, and as she dredged through her memory, she remembered images of

Seiryo dressed in similar attire, in the days before Kihaku's eventual destruction. "Who are you?"

"My name's Ryousuke." The man offered her another smile. "Ryousuke Takamura. And you're Lady Tokimi, aren't you?"

Tokimi's eyes widened, then she giggled at the formality, taking her companion off guard by her reaction. She clutched the flowers tightly to her chest, shaking her head.

"Tokimi isn't lady." She said, evidently amused. "Suki is Lady. Tokimi is just Tokimi. Inoue no Tokimi."

"I see." Takamura grinned back at her. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise — I didn't mean to offend you."

"It's not rude." Tokimi assured him. "Why are you here, Ryousuke Takamura-san? You are not from Jurai? Tokimi does not know you."

"No, I imagine you don't." Takamura acknowledged. "I'm an old Academy friend of your guardian — of Seiryo's."

Tokimi's brow furrowed.

"Academy?" She repeated. "Like Washu-nee-chan? Science Academy? Tokimi doesn't..."

"No. The Galaxy Police Academy." Takamura shook his head. "Back when we were teenagers, we were classmates. And I was hoping to speak to him while I was here on Jurai, but I haven't been able to find him. He's a busy man these days, I guess — it's a shame."

"Friend of Nii-chan's?" Tokimi pursed her lips, then she nodded, offering him a wide smile. "Tokimi understands. I didn't know of this friend — Tokimi only lives with Nii-chan since Kihaku was blown up."

"Ah yes." Takamura's expression softened. "I'm sorry about your planet, Tokimi-san. I heard about that happening — it must have been a bad time for you, to lose your home like that."

"Tokimi misses the World." Tokimi agreed thoughtfully. "But Tokimi is not Eagle any more. Is not Miko. So Tokimi lives on Jurai. And Tokimi likes Jurai. Nii-chan and Suki are kind to her. Tokimi likes it here. So Tokimi stays, always. Nii-chan promised."

"I see." Takamura grinned at her, and Tokimi dimpled, holding out a hand to grasp his fingers in her pale, delicate ones.

"I am pleased to meet you, Ryousuke-san." She said properly. "Friend of Nii-chan's is friend of Tokimi's, too."

“I’m glad to hear it.” Takamura laughed, and Tokimi cocked her head, eying him pensively.

“Tokimi thinks you are kind person. A man who helps people.” She said reflectively. “Did you come because of Nii-chan’s hurt? Because of Kaede-sama’s death? Nii-chan is very sad... very alone, because of Kaede-sama’s passing. Are you here... because of that?”

“Honestly, I’m not.” Takamura looked taken aback at this sudden burst of perception. “Though I appreciate the compliment. And yes, I do try and help people, if I can. Which is the real reason I’m here. I might need your help, Tokimi-san — if you’re willing.”

“Tokimi can... help Ryousuke-san?” Tokimi bunched her flowers together, setting them down carefully on the grass as she sat down, indicating for the Agent to join her. “How? Tokimi is just here, on Jurai. Tokimi is not Galaxy Police. Tokimi does not know... anything about this.”

Her eyes widened as she remembered something.

“Oh! But Kiyo-neesan is! Ryousuke-san, Kiyo-neesan knows Galaxy Police! You could talk to her! She can help you!”

“Kiyo...” Takamura hesitated, then dropped down onto the grass beside her, casting her a smile. “Kiyone Makibi, you mean?”

Tokimi nodded.

“She is very good friend of Nii-chan and Tokimi and Suki.” She agreed. “And is Galaxy Police.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve already spoken to her.” Takamura admitted. “But what I need to know is something I think maybe you can tell me — at least, I hope so. I don’t know... how much you can remember, and I don’t want to ask you anything that... that upsets you, all right? But it would help me — and Seiryō too, I think — if you can try and tell me as much as you know.”

Tokimi’s expression became startled, and she nodded her head.

“Tokimi will try.” She agreed. “What is it? What does Tokimi know that Ryousuke-san does not?”

“I want to ask you about Kihaku.” Takamura hazarded. “And how you and Seiryō first met.”

“Oh.” Tokimi’s expression became shadowed. “Tokimi was... it was bad time. Tokimi was... ill. Tokimi was World. Was not Tokimi any more. She made Nii-chan do bad things, and Nii-chan could not stop.

Tokimi doesn't like this memory... Tokimi tries to forget it."

"I'm sorry." Takamura's expression became sympathetic. "You see, though, the thing is — someone is trying to hurt Seiryō because of it. And I don't want that to happen. Do you?"

"Hurt Nii-chan?" Tokimi looked aghast. "But... It was Tokimi who was bad! Not Nii-chan! Nii-chan couldn't help... Nii-chan just... Nii-chan protects Suki and family! Nii-chan was not bad person... *Tokimi* was!"

"What's going on here?" As tears glittered on Tokimi's lashes, the sound of Suki's voice broke through her rising anguish and she turned, holding out her hands to the other girl as if for reassurance.

"Suki!"

"Toki-chan... what's the matter?" Suki looked anxious, taking the pale hands in her grip as she sent Takamura a suspicious glance. "Who are you — why are you scaring Tokimi? I thought Sasami said you Galaxy Police weren't to come near Seiryō or our family... why are you harassing Tokimi like this?"

"I'm not harassing anyone." Takamura said quietly. "You must be Suki-sama — Seiryō's sister."

"Yes, though that's not answering my question." Suki said quietly. "Tokimi is upset... what did you say to her?"

Takamura eyed her for a moment, and Tokimi saw a troubled expression flicker across his gaze.

"I don't want to cause her any distress." He said at length. "And if I could speak to Seiryō — it would help more than you know. Your brother is being investigated by the Elite for various things, including an attack on the planet known as Earth that happened during his time in uniform. My partner and I are old friends of Seiryō's from the Academy days and we want to prevent this going any further. But noone is willing to let us address the source of the problem. I realise it's difficult and insensitive to be prying into your family at this time, Lady Suki — but this is a serious situation. If it proceeds — if a tribunal is brought against Seiryō for this — he could be fined, exiled, imprisoned. And if it is a bigger operation than simply that... I would not like to say. This is not a game... your brother is in grave danger of being in serious trouble."

Suki whitened.

"Are you serious?" She whispered. "Seiryō is...? But Sasami... Jurai

will... protect him, won't they? He was... the Emperor... he didn't... it wasn't his fault."

"I know that." Takamura told her gently. "Lady Suki, I told you — we're here to help your brother. Not harm him. And I came to speak to Tokimi only to confirm what we already believe — that he was under the influence of some magic when the events occurred. The same magic that caused Tokimi-san's impairment."

"Tokimi is broken." Tokimi interjected absently. "Because of the World's magic."

"You're not broken, Toki." Suki told her firmly. "And I want you to stop saying that. Just because Mihoshi let it slip — she didn't mean it how it sounded."

"But Tokimi is." Tokimi said matter of factly. "Is truth, so Tokimi says it. That's all."

She turned anxious eyes on the Agent.

"Tokimi did not mean to do bad things." She said apprehensively. "Will Tokimi be in trouble, because she put spell on Nii-chan?"

"You're in no trouble at all, Tokimi-san." Takamura shook his head. "And I'm sorry I've upset you by dragging up bad memories. But it's all to help protect the man you call Nii-chan — so I hope you can forgive me."

"Seiryō got involved in that in the first place to protect his family." Suki said softly, her voice shaking slightly, and Tokimi knew she was remembering the events that had led up to her brother's defection. "To protect M... Mother and I."

"From what?" Takamura frowned. "From the magic that possessed Tokimi-san?"

"From..." Suki sighed, rubbing her temples.

"Father had just died." She said at length. "And my mother is about to be buried. I don't want to be talking about this with a man whose name I don't even know."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Takamura looked abashed. "Ryousuke Takamura, Special Agent of the Galaxy Police Elite."

He smiled sheepishly.

"Such sneaky tactics are normally my partner's bent." He admitted ruefully. "But it's so frustrating, having so many doors closed in our faces. And no one will even speak to Seiryō on our behalf. I realise this

is a difficult time — but surely it will be more difficult if charges are brought? And worse... we suspect someone is actively moving against him. If this is the case... we lack time to act and prevent it.”

“Ryousuke-san is Nii-chan’s friend.” Tokimi said seriously. “He is telling truth, Suki. He wants to help Nii-chan. You should tell him... tell him about Seiji-sama. Everything.”

Suki’s eyes opened wide at this, and she shook her head.

“Tokimi, it’s not as simple as you think.” She said quickly, and Tokimi eyed her in confusion, registering the tension that had flared in the younger girl’s expression. “Father had nothing to do with this. He died, and left us to handle things on our own at a bad time. That’s all.”

“But...” Tokimi looked confused, and Suki shook her head.

“Tokim-chan.” She said softly. “You know how Seiryō feels about dredging up memories from that time. He worries about you — and so do I.”

Tokimi paused, eying first Takamura, then her adoptive sister. Then she nodded.

“Tokimi does not like to remember. Nii-chan does not, either.” She admitted. “Sorry, Ryousuke-san. It is bad time. Better in the past. Magic is gone now. Nii-chan is good person again. Tokimi too.”

“I have no doubts about that.” Takamura said softly. “I’m sorry if I scared you. I really didn’t mean to.”

Tokimi sighed, then nodded her head.

“It’s all right.” She murmured. “Ryousuke-san is good person. Tokimi knows. And Tokimi wants to help. But... Nii-chan is hurting. Bad hurting. Kaede-sama...”

She trailed off, glancing at Suki for confirmation, and Suki nodded her head slowly.

“Tokimi is correct.” She said quietly, folding her hands in her lap as she did so. “Ryousuke-san, if you are truly a friend of my brother’s... can’t you at least respect that fact and give him some space? At least for a while? To be interrogated on any subject at present...”

“Perhaps.” Takamura agreed evenly. “The thing is, Suki-sama, we’re hitting a lot of dead ends in our investigation. Something sinister is going on and even we don’t know all of the details. If we did, it would help. But what we do know is that your brother is a target. That at the

very least, someone does want to prosecute him for what happened on the planet known as Earth. At worst, they want to involve his name further in some dark scheme. We *need* to know what happened a year and a bit ago, even if it is painful for all of you to remember. It's a bad part of my job, having to pull things out of people's pasts like this — but I don't want Seiryō to be arraigned for something that wasn't his fault. Particularly because like you, I'm a subject of Jurai's Empire. And I don't want to see Seiryō used as a tool to act against Lord Azusa or the freedom and peace of Jurai's Imperial government."

Suki's eyes opened wide at this, and Tokimi saw genuine alarm in her foster sister's expression.

"You *are* serious." She whispered, and Takamura nodded.

"Deadly serious." He said gravely. "Or I wouldn't have come to all this trouble. And I certainly wouldn't have spoken to Tokimi-san. I know that she was hurt by the experience, and we don't consider her in any way a danger or a threat in this. All we need to know is that there's someone who can prove that Seiryō was innocent of the crimes he's been accused of. That the attack on the Earth city, and the other sundry events were because he was under the control of dark magic and not because of a Juraian scheme to undermine other powers."

Tokimi frowned, digesting this slowly. Then she raised her gaze, eying the Agent in earnest.

"If Tokimi tells Ryousuke-san about Kihaku, will Nii-chan be all right?" She asked softly, and Takamura gazed at her in surprise.

"Well, at least where those charges are concerned." He agreed. "When Seiryō was tried by Jurai's tribunal, Tokimi-san, you weren't there to give witness."

"Tokimi was still comatose then." Suki said quietly. "At the time, we didn't know if she even would wake up."

"So I understand." Takamura acknowledged. "And so far, we can't speak to Seiryō, we don't know the whereabouts of the droid Zero and we can't contact Washu Hakubi without help because the Earth is a tentative area of space at the moment. We've spoken to Detective Makibi and enlisted her help — I hope — but to have your testimony also... would help Seiryō a lot."

Tokimi's eyes narrowed.

"Tokimi will help Nii-chan, if Ryousuke-san needs her to." She said finally. "Tokimi was to blame. Nii-chan protected Suki and Kaede-sama. Nii-chan didn't want to do those things... but Tokimi made him."

Tokimi made Clay... made Clay take him and made him do bad things. Tokimi... put bad magic into Seiryō. It was... World's magic. Kihaku magic. Tokimi could not help it... Tokimi was World. But Tokimi... Tokimi did it. All bad things... Tokimi did them. Nii-chan... is not bad. Nii-chan... was hurt too. But Nii-chan... Nii-chan forgives Tokimi. Loves Tokimi. Gives her home on Jurai. So Tokimi... will help Nii-chan however she can. Nii-chan... should not be punished."

"Would you be willing to say that in a court hearing, if it went to a Galaxy Police tribunal?" Takamura asked softly, and Tokimi was aware of the apprehensive glance Suki sent her way. She met the young noblewoman's gaze for a moment, as understanding flickered through her senses. She smiled.

"Tokimi will." She said firmly. "But Nii-chan and Suki are not to blame. Tokimi is. Tokimi is responsible."

"Thank you." Takamura looked relieved. "I appreciate that, at the very least. As I said, no charges will be raised against you for any of it. You have my word on that. But we don't know how far this enemy force is willing to go where Seiryō is concerned. The crimes on the Earth seem to be something of a smokescreen to attract attention and suspicion towards him. I have a feeling they plan to do something more."

He sighed.

"I won't try and speak to Seiryō without Imperial permission — or at least, without the consent of his family." He added. "You know better than me how he is at present, with the death of his mother... I do remember that he was very fond of her, when we were working together. And I know when he left the Galaxy Police to visit you all — before he encountered you, Tokimi-san — it was because he was concerned for his mother's health. My partner doesn't quite believe that Seiryō's feelings for his family run so deeply, but I know that they do. So I believe what you've told me, and that Seiryō was backed into a corner because his father died and he thought his family were at risk from the dark Kii magic. And I also believe that he's probably pretty upset at the moment. So I won't push to speak to him face to face just yet."

"Thank you for that." Suki offered him a smile, and Tokimi eyed her companion in surprise, glancing between her and the young agent as she gauged their expressions. "For understanding that this is a difficult time for all of us, but for Seiryō most of all."

"I will ask you, though, in return... if you can mention it to him

when he's feeling more capable." Takamura got to his feet, dusting off his uniform as he grinned. "Because we do need his help. And it should be his decision... not Azusa-sama's or anyone else's... as to whether he wants to be involved in clearing his own name."

Suki hesitated for a moment, then she nodded.

"When he's feeling better." She said cautiously. "I'll tell him that you asked to speak to him. But it won't be today, Ryousuke-san. Today we buried my mother. And Seiryō-niichan needs time to adjust... more so than any of us."

"Then I'll leave it with you." Takamura said evenly. "I obviously have a lot more work to do, if I'm going to find an alternative way of intervening in all of this than by enlisting Seiryō's help!"

"Takeru-niisan?"

Sasami pushed open the door of the Council Chamber, pausing as she caught sight of her brother in law and offering him a smile as he glanced up from his screen, returning it with a warm one of his own.

"Sasami-chan — is something the matter?" He asked softly, getting to his feet as he crossed the floor towards her. "Are you troubled by this morning's memorial? You gave a very beautiful blessing... I know Lady Kaede would have appreciated it."

"No..." Sasami frowned, shaking her head. "No, it's not that. But I do want to speak to you, if I can. I mean, if you're not too busy. It's sort of about this morning, yes — but it's not because of Kaede-sama or my blessing."

"You're confusing me." Takeru admitted, offering her a rueful smile as he held out his arm to her. "But come walk with me in the Royal Forest and we'll talk. Am I to guess that this is a confidential conversation of some sort? Ayeka did mention to me that she wanted me to help you, if and where I could — is it something of that nature?"

"Possibly." Sasami acknowledged. "I didn't realise my sister had spoken to you already — but I'm glad that she has. I don't want her worrying about any government stuff, and I don't have Seiryō to stick up for me at the moment either."

She sighed, shaking her head.

"I want to stick up for myself." She added. "I don't want to have to run to you or Seiryō or Ayeka to do my speaking for me. It makes me

kind of mad, you know... that it has to be that way.”

“Well, Ayeka seems convinced you should be allowed your say, and I don’t argue with your sister if I can help it.” Takeru looked amused. “And if in the meantime I can help, I will. You have to remember, Sasami-chan, that you are still only thirteen. And there are no noble families of Jurai who allow children to attend the Council sessions or anything of that nature until they reach eighteen.”

“I’m not a member of a noble family, Takeru.” Sasami said firmly, watching as her companion’s eyes widened in surprise. “I’m Princess Sasami, Lady Tsunami’s representative. And I don’t care that I’m thirteen. Tsunami is a zillion years older than that and it sucks that noone listens when she has something she wants to say.”

She folded her arms across her chest, a look of stubborn resolution in her crimson eyes, and Takeru gaped at her for a moment. Then he laughed, holding up his hands.

“I am corrected.” He said softly, bowing his head towards her. “Forgive me, Lady Sasami, for speaking out of turn.”

Sasami stared at him, then she grinned ruefully, shaking her head.

“No... it’s not you.” She assured him. “It’s just the general attitude. Father did promise me that when I wanted to, I could be involved. I feel like it’s been reneged a bit. And I don’t want to spend all my time in Court, but with Ayeka’s health, and now this...”

Her brows knitted together, as her companion pushed open the door of the chamber, leading the way through the passages to the Royal Forest where the tree ships of many of the royal family of Jurai slept.

“Then if you can explain it to me, please do.” He suggested.

“I’ll try.” Sasami frowned. “Takeru, you were involved with Agent Imaguchi when he came to Jurai, right?”

“Imaguchi?” Takeru looked startled, nodding his head. “Yes, I was. Why?”

“Because he was on Jurai this morning. He tried to speak to Seiryō, in fact.” Sasami replied, watching as her brother in law’s eyes glittered with anger. “Yeah, I sort of thought he probably didn’t have your permission or anything. I know he didn’t have mine. But Takeru, he was there, and I think... if I hadn’t been there... he would have spirited Seiryō away somewhere to ask him a whole lot of questions.”

“But you were there.” Takeru murmured, and Sasami nodded.

“And because Ayeka told me something about those Agents, I was able to interfere.” She agreed. “But this is the problem I have, Takeru. See, I know Seiryō — better than most people, these days. And I know that he really misses his mother. This morning he was composed and even-tempered and everything, but he wasn’t Seiryō... you must have noticed it too. Right? You know him pretty well too, even though you’re not friends.”

“I did notice.” Takeru admitted. “But I would not claim to know him well, Sasami-chan. In fact, these days, I think I know him not at all.”

He spread his hands.

“However, I did extend a branch of peace to him, and it was not refused.” He added. “He permitted me to come to the Memorial, and I believe... that things are now cleared somewhat between us. If only for the sake of Jurai’s stability and my unborn son’s future — I think we have reached an accord.”

He sighed.

“The truth is, I do not wish to see him harassed either.” He admitted. “Even though part of me thinks perhaps he deserves to be — Kaede-sama was a great lady. And her loss is painful for anyone who knew her. For Suki and Seiryō it must be near unbearable.”

“Yeah, something like that.” Sasami’s eyes narrowed. “But this is what’s bothering me, Takeru. I don’t know enough, but I do know this. That spy who was in custody — the one Father locked up — he killed himself, didn’t he?”

“Yes.” Takeru stared at her. “Who told you that?”

“Ayeka.” Sasami replied. “Why? Do you think it’s something that shouldn’t be discussed with a teenage Princess?”

She could not keep the edge from her tones, and Takeru laughed ruefully, shaking his head.

“I do not seek to argue with Princesses of Jurai.” He said evenly. “No, Sasami. Not at all.”

“Then you’ll tell me about this guy who died, right?” Sasami asked him hopefully.

“Tell you...?”

“Who he was. What he wanted. All of the things that Kamidake doesn’t know.”

“I expect that that comprises very little.” Takeru rubbed his temples, as they crossed the grass towards the broad trunk of Tsunami’s own blessed tree. “Sasami, we don’t know much at all about this spy, either. Not even his real name. He came from Kanemitsu. He was probably an extremist. And he was in possession of documents relating to Seiryō’s hearing. That’s all we know. Even with the autopsy report — that’s all we’ve discovered.”

“Kanemitsu.” Sasami brushed her fingers briefly against the trunk of her tree, deep in thought. As she did so, a flicker of answering energy prickled through the wood, dancing against her skin as if making contact, and at the sensation she smiled, casting a grin up towards the great tree’s leaf-laden branches.

“Tsunami thinks that there’s a connection to the Sumire.” She said quietly. “And so do I. Because that was Kanemitsu, wasn’t it? And so is this. And they were really really mad because all the people on that ship got killed. And Yugi did it, we know that. She came and she killed them and she tried to kill me, too. But they don’t necessarily believe that. Right? Because they don’t like Jurai. Do they?”

“You have a pretty good grasp of our planetary relationship with them, Sasami, yes.” Takeru nodded his head. “Is that Tsunami’s insight or your own?”

“Don’t really know.” Sasami admitted. “But the thing is, Takeru, I protected Seiryō today. Because he’s upset and it sucks. And I promised Suki too that I wouldn’t let him get involved in any work stuff or anything until he was feeling more like himself. But... to come all the way here and sneak around and risk making Father or Uncle angry... seems pretty odd to me. Imaguchi-san — do you think he’s a foolish person? Or a clever one?”

“A clever one, undoubtedly.” Takeru rubbed his chin. “And I see what you mean. He came here even though it was risky — because... he’s desperate?”

“Are they really trying to help Seiryō, Takeru?” Sasami asked plaintively, and Takeru grimaced, sinking back against the tree himself.

“I wish I knew.” He admitted. “But I’m just following the directives the Emperor gave me. That this matter is closed. They keep wanting to pry into the incident on the Earth... which would basically imply that Juraian justice in this matter is worthless.”

“Kiyone thinks the Earth is in danger, Takeru. That Seiryō’s being set up.”

“Kiyone, huh?” Takeru sighed. “I don’t know anything about that. To be honest, Sasami, I don’t know that I’m cut out for all this high-powered intrigue anyway. That Jurai are probably embroiled in another situation with Kanemitsu — that’s as much as I can handle. The Earth is a powerless planet. But it has Jurai’s protection. So long as it has that...”

“Kiyone thinks that something is going to use the Earth to try and make Jurai look bad. Maybe it’s Kanemitsu — I don’t know. But she said she’d go back to the Galaxy Police and try to find out.” Sasami interrupted him. “I know everything about what happened to Seiryō when he was under Tokimi’s spell, Takeru... everything. More even than you or Uncle or Father do. And I don’t want that whole thing to be dragged up again. They’ll start asking questions about things and... I don’t want that to happen. I don’t want Seiryō put under pressure, and I don’t want anyone in trouble. But... if Kiyone is right... I wonder. Is it the right thing to do, to keep him out of it? Maybe... if Imaguchi is on his side... maybe we should tell him the truth?”

“You’re speaking in tongues.” Takeru admitted. “What do you mean, things that even we don’t know?”

“I am Tsunami. She knows things other people don’t.” Sasami said simply. “That’s all. They’re none of your business, Takeru — they’re private, Tsunami things that have nothing to do with you.”

“When you talk like that, I can see the resemblance between you and Ayeka.” Takeru reflected, and Sasami started, staring at him in surprise.

“Really?”

“Really.” Takeru nodded. “You both have strong principles, I think. And if something comes up against them, you stand firm. I admire it in Ayeka, Sasami-chan. And I’m happy to see it in you, too. Ayeka’s right — I think you’re probably better suited for this government business than I am.”

“Well, that’s why I want you to tell me everything you can tell me.” Sasami folded her arms. “Because I don’t want to hurt Seiryō but... I want to know what’s going on. All of it, not just the official stories or the stuff that people think has happened. Kiyone’s already promised to do what she can at Headquarters, but we can’t just sit around here and do nothing, either.”

“We can hardly accuse Kanemitsu of any kind of plot with such flimsy evidence.”

“I don’t want to accuse Kanemitsu of anything.” Sasami shook her head. “Kanemitsu is Uncle’s problem. I’m Tsunami. Jurai is her concern. And I’m Sasami — who wants to help her friends. I’m not Emperor of Jurai, after all.”

Takeru chuckled wryly, nodding his head.

“Yes, so I see.” He murmured. “All right then, Sasami-sama. What would you have me do?”

“Reports have been submitted to Father and Uncle about the spy, right?”

“Yes, but I already told you all about him — there’s nothing in the reports they have that I haven’t told you.”

“What about the reports on the Sumire, Takeru?”

“They’re classified, but...”

“You can get hold of them?”

“I can, but I don’t see...”

“Tsunami can sense the hatred in the atmosphere. It makes her kinda unhappy, and that affects me too.” Sasami said gravely. “I don’t want to read all the icky yucky gory details of what Yugi did to those people. It’s gross and I don’t want to know. All I want to know is who the people were who came to Jurai on that ship. That’s all. Because maybe the spy is connected to them somehow... and then maybe I’ll have something to tell Kiyone.”

“The Sumire...” Takeru frowned. “You mean a list of the dead?”

“I suppose so.” Sasami faltered for a moment, biting her lip. “This is complicated and I’ve never done anything like it before... investigated on my own, I mean. And usually I’d ask Seiryō, because he has the training, but I can’t this time. I feel like we should tell him but I don’t want to. So if I can do something on my own first — maybe I can still keep my promise to Suki. Right?”

“Okay...” Takeru hesitated, then nodded. “I suppose that’s fair. What do you want to know about these people? We don’t even know the spy’s real name... so I don’t see how that can help.”

“But we do know that they’re connected to the Galaxy Police, right?” Sasami chewed down on her lip. “Isn’t that what Imaguchi-san and his friend came and said, when they first spoke to Uncle? Kamidake said as much — isn’t that right?”

“Yes.” Takeru admitted. “That is true. But we don’t have any names

in that regard, either. None whatsoever, in fact.”

“Maybe not.” Sasami’s brow creased as she carefully thought out the situation. “But... there must be a list somewhere of people in the Galaxy Police who come from Kanemitsu... right?”

“Right...”

“And we could find out their names... yes?”

“I suppose, but...”

“And if we compared them to the Sumire, we might find out something... yes?”

“Sasami-chan, you’re taking huge leaps. We don’t know that it has anything to do with the Sumire, and without evidence...”

“Tsunami thinks it does.” Sasami interrupted. “And that’s good enough for me.”

Takeru sighed, but nodded.

“All right.” He acknowledged. “If that’s what you want, I’ll see what I can do. Getting the Galaxy Police to cooperate with that kind of a demand won’t be easy, but I’ll try. You have my word.”

“Good.” Sasami flashed him a smile. “Then I feel like I’m helping Seiryō instead of him always helping me. Tsunami’s sure that something bad is coming — she knows because she’s sure it’s some kind of threat to Jurai. Like I said, she can feel the hatred in the air. But she’s also worried about Tenchi and Ryoko on the Earth and so am I, Takeru. They’re like my brother and sister and I don’t want anything bad happening to them.”

Determination crossed her crimson eyes.

“I may not be Tsunami yet, but one day I’ll be her.” She added firmly. “And that means I have to protect Jurai and Jurai’s people, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose it does.” Takeru admitted. “All right, Sasami-sama. If that’s what you want — I’ll do my best.”

“Sasami-chan?”

At the sound of Suki’s voice, Sasami glanced up in surprise, offering her friend a warm grin as she held out her hands.

“Suki! What are you doing here of all places... are you looking for me?”

“Yes... I was.” Suki admitted, casting Takeru a faint, shy smile as she nodded her head. “One of the guards said they saw you come this way with Lord Takeru, and I... am I interrupting something important?”

“No, not really.” Sasami shook her head. “We were talking about boring political stuff, but we’re done now. You don’t need to worry, Suki — come join us. Tsunami likes you, after all — she won’t mind if you come and shelter beneath her tree.”

“I should thank you — and Tsunami — for this morning anyway.” Suki acknowledged, carefully doing as she was bidden. “Mother would have been touched, Sasami — thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Sasami dimpled. “She was a good person and she deserved a good send off.”

“Something is on your mind, Lady Suki?” Takeru eyed her keenly, and Suki bit her lip, nodding.

“Sort of.” She agreed. “Takeru-sama, are there meant to be Galaxy Police on Jurai?”

“Galaxy Police?” Takeru frowned. “Agent Imaguchi?”

“Ima... guchi?” Suki shook her head. “No. No, this was a man called Takamura. Ryousuke Takamura. He said he was a friend of Seiryō’s — I found him talking to Tokimi while she went to pick flowers.”

“To Tokimi?” Sasami’s eyes widened. “But why?”

“I feel like my family is under seige.” Suki confessed. “To ask questions about what happened a year ago. Sasami, is it true that Seiryō is in trouble? That he might be sent to prison or at least charged with attacking the Earth by the Galaxy Police?”

“Apparently it’s a possibility.” Sasami sighed, spreading her hands. “But don’t worry, Suki. I’m Seiryō’s liege Princess, and I won’t let it happen. Noone’s going to mess with Tsunami and besides, I understand the situation better than any stupid officers do. He’s not going anywhere, and he’s not getting into trouble if I can help it.”

“I know you’ll do everything you can.” Suki’s brow furrowed. “But it worries me. And Agent Takamura — he seemed like a nice man and he did assure me he wouldn’t go after Seiryō without Imperial permission — but it bothered me, him talking to Tokimi. Tokimi took to him — she said he was honest, and that what he said was true, which was comforting. But also worrying. I... don’t know what she

might have told him, if I hadn't happened on the scene at the right moment."

Takeru's eyes narrowed.

"What would Tokimi know that would hurt anyone?" He asked softly. "The girl is impaired. She flits around the place with her flowers and she's clearly a happy soul, but she's simple. She can't possibly understand the implications of all of this."

"She can and she does, Lord Takeru." Suki shook her head. "You underestimate her far too much, you know. She's not simple at all."

"Suki's right." Sasami agreed. "She is impaired, but she's not oblivious."

"Really?" Takeru looked surprised. "The reports I had indicated that her brain was damaged by the Kii magic."

"It was." Sasami nodded. "But that doesn't mean she doesn't understand things, Takeru-niisan. Or that she can't remember things. It's just... what does she remember, Suki? Does she remember everything about what happened now? Or just bits and pieces?"

Suki looked troubled.

"I think she remembers a lot." She murmured, and from the flicker of fear in the girl's eye, Sasami realised the implications of her friend's words.

"Oh." She breathed. "And you worry that she might..."

"She wanted me to talk to Agent Takamura about... that." Suki ran her fingers through her hair. "And I can't do that. I'm scared to do that. And I know what Seiryō would say, if he knew. More, what he would do. I don't like that these men are flitting around Jurai unattended, I suppose. Trying to catch my brother off guard, trying to talk to Tokimi and I. Even if they are allies... I wish they'd leave the past well alone!"

"I get the distinct feeling I'm missing a part of this puzzle." Takeru observed, and Suki pinkened, shrugging her shoulders.

"It's nothing important." She murmured. "It's a closed matter. The Emperor said so. And I don't want it dragged up again. Seiryō suffered so much after he came back from the Earth. After the Kii magic was pulled out of him. And I hated seeing it. Sometimes he was so... I was afraid I was going to lose him, one way or another. That it would drive him mad, or to do something reckless and stupid. And I was so afraid to be on my own. I don't want to remember that time... Takeru-

sama, is there nothing that can be done about it? Even if people are trying to use it to hurt Seiryō now, surely they can be stopped without having to rake all of those things up again?”

“We’re going to do our best, Suki-chan.” Sasami said gently, squeezing her friend’s fingers in hers. “I promise, we are. That was what Takeru and I were discussing. Since Ayeka’s not going to be actively involved in government until after the Prince is born, I’m going to take her place. And I am not going to let anyone hurt you or Tokimi or Seiryō. You have mine and Tsunami’s word on that, so don’t look so upset. I know what you’re thinking, but it’s not going to happen. I swear.”

Suki sighed.

“I’m glad.” She murmured. “But I feel guilty. All of this... is my fault. All of it. And Seiryō... all of it. I can’t stand that. That it’s all... because of me.”

“I highly doubt that that’s the case, Suki-sama.” Takeru said gently. “Even if Seiryō sought to protect you from harm, you can’t blame yourself for what happened next.”

“Yes I can. And I do.” Tears glittered on Suki’s lashes. “You don’t understand, Takeru-sama — and I’m scared to explain. But I don’t want my brother to... I know if they did arrest him, I know what he’d tell them. And I know... they might... charge him. And it wouldn’t be... but I know what he’d do. And I can’t let that happen. I can’t let it!”

The tears spilled down her cheeks, and Sasami hugged her friend tightly, sending Takeru an apprehensive look as she realised how close to panic her friend was.

“Suki-chan, Tsunami’s protecting you both now.” She murmured. “No matter what Seiryō says to them — even if they come all guns blazing. Tsunami will not let anything happen to him.”

“But people will think... people already think... and at the moment, Seiryō isn’t strong enough to... to handle it the way he usually does.” Suki said tearfully. “And now these people are around, asking questions... Mother’s just dead, and Seiryō might be in trouble and I... I feel like I’m going to lose him somehow, too! And if I do it will be b... because of me!”

Sasami sighed, hugging her companion a second time.

“It’s not your fault.” She whispered. “And Seiryō wouldn’t think so, either. You know as well as I do. Everything a year ago...”

She faltered, remembering that Takeru was still there, and she turned, eying her brother in law doubtfully.

Takeru held up his hands.

"I have no idea what the subtexts are of this conversation." He said softly. "But I'm starting to wonder whether or not there's a good reason for us to be keeping Seiryō away from the Galaxy Police. And significantly, Tokimi. Is this relating, by any chance, to her killing of your noble father, Suki-sama?"

Suki tensed, jerking away from Sasami's embrace as she stared at the Prince Consort in dismay.

"What did you say?" She demanded. "Why would you think something like that?! That Tokimi...? Why would you? Tokimi didn't kill my father — she wouldn't!"

"But she ordered the deaths of a lot of people, and wiped out Kihaku." Takeru looked startled at the vehemence in her words. "And that was the general opinion given at the hearing — even though it's accepted that she was possessed at the time. That Tokimi was responsible for Seiji-sama's death, and that was why Seiryō became involved in her schemes to begin with."

He frowned.

"If that's not true... you don't mean that Seiryō... *did* kill Lord Seiji, after all?" He asked softly. "And after I've begun to believe he'd not stoop that low — are you telling me that... it was a lie? It was a cover-up? And Sasami-chan... you were involved in this?"

He turned to eye her accusingly.

"*You* were the one who pushed to avoid using truth serum." He added. "Is that why? Is Seiryō a murderer after all... is that what we're protecting with all of this?"

"Seiryō did *not* kill my father." Suki's voice shook, and Sasami could tell that she was on the verge of another storm of tears. "Even if he told you he did, Takeru-sama, he didn't. He didn't kill my father. I know. I was there. He didn't kill Father... and nor did Tokimi!"

"Then why all the panic?" Takeru looked confused. "What harm can it do, if these Police ask questions about it? If Seiryō didn't kill Lord Seiji, and the matter is at rest, why would it be a problem? They cannot charge him on something he didn't do."

Suki swallowed hard, shaking her head.

“You don’t understand.” She whispered. “If they asked him... if they pressed him to know everything... he’d tell them he did. He’d tell them it was his fault. I know he would... because that’s how he is. And then these people who want to hurt him — they’d have a weapon, wouldn’t they? Something to use to hurt and destroy my brother. Something to make all of this... worse.”

Takeru snorted.

“Seiryō is not a fool.” He said pragmatically. “He would not confess to a crime he didn’t commit. Not unless...”

He faltered, and Sasami felt her heart skip a beat as she saw the flicker of realisation dawn in Takeru’s dark eyes. He faltered, staring at Suki for a moment, as if properly digesting her words. Then he whispered a curse, causing Sasami’s eyes to almost pop out of her head.

“Takeru-niisan, did you just swear in front of Tsunami’s holy tree?” She murmured reproachfully, and Takeru gathered his wits, pushing his hands together as he bowed his head apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Tsunami-sama.” He murmured. “It’s just... suddenly I understand much more clearly something which I had not until this point.”

Suki bit her lip, eying him warily, and he returned her glance with a keen, searching one of his own.

“You killed Seiji-sama, didn’t you?” He said softly, and Suki dropped her gaze, slowly nodding.

“Yes.” She whispered, her voice barely audible. “But I... I didn’t mean it, Takeru-sama. I didn’t... and Seiryō... to protect me... he...”

She swallowed hard, and Takeru sighed heavily, shaking his head.

“This complicates things.” He reflected. “I had no idea that it was so complex as this.”

He glanced at Sasami.

“And you knew this? But concealed it from the Emperor and Jurai’s court?”

“I wasn’t permitted to testify in Jurai’s court. My Father said I couldn’t.” Sasami said defiantly. “But Suki isn’t a murderer, Takeru. And if you tell anyone, I’ll get Tsunami to curse you or something. I’m not kidding. Seiji-sama’s death was an accident. He was the real monster, not Suki and not Seiryō. Seiji had a sword at Seiryō’s throat.

Suki saved Seiryō's life. That's what really happened. Noone murdered him... and if you do anything to hurt my friend, I will be really, really angry!"

Takeru stared at her for a moment, then he spread his hands.

"I see." He murmured. "So it was that way."

Miserably Suki nodded.

"So you see, it is my fault." She whispered. "I only meant to knock him out. But I... it was so sudden. And I had to... to stop him hurting my brother. So I... and then he... and Seiryō promised that noone would ever find out. But... Zero... she saw everything. And she recorded it. So Tokimi... she and Clay used it to blackmail Seiryō into doing her bidding. And she poisoned him with Kii magic to keep him on her side. Such awful things happened to him, when really it was all my fault. And now more awful things will... because he... more than anything, Seiryō-niichan will protect me. I know he will. More than ever now Mother is gone... because he... he and I... we have each other, and that's all."

"And I'm not kidding about Tsunami, either." Sasami said emphatically. "I mean it, Takeru. Even Ayeka doesn't know about this. And she mustn't. Noone must."

"And Seiryō really must not be interrogated on this subject, especially if he is not in his full wits at present." Takeru rubbed his chin. "I am beginning to see a side to this old foe of mine which I never before perceived. That he did it to protect you, Suki-sama... I had not realised he could act in such a way."

"He's always protected me." Suki murmured. "Father did bad things, Takeru-sama. You knew my father. You can't have any illusions about his character. But he raised his hand to me, more than once. He drank, he womanised, he gambled the family money away. And when Seiryō tried to stop these things, Father sent him away. Before he died, Father told Seiryō that he sent him away to be killed in action. That he hoped he would never come back. But he did come back, because I wrote and told him that Mother was failing. I put him and Father at cross-purposes by forcing them into company with one another again. And I... I killed my father to save my brother, only to make him suffer so much."

She swallowed hard.

"I would do anything to protect him now." She admitted. "But I... I know he wouldn't let me. Even if I confessed, even if I accepted

punishment for what happened, he would not allow it. He would ensure... that the blame fell on him. The punishment, too. He's always said... that he wouldn't let anyone touch me for Father's death. Because I did it... saving his life."

"Now I understand the delicacy of the issue a little more." Takeru's eyes narrowed. "And Tokimi remembers this circumstance?"

"I didn't know she did, until she began talking about Seiji with Takamura-san." Suki admitted. "Now I think maybe she does. And she isn't stupid, but if she perceives someone as a friend, she will trust them. None of us have ever sworn her to secrecy on that subject, because we didn't realise she knew what had happened to my father. But..."

"Well, then Agents Imaguchi and Takamura will just have to keep away from Jurai for a while." Takeru reflected, offering her a smile. "It's all right, Suki-dono. I will speak to Lord Haru and the Emperor and tell them that they were harassing Tokimi in the palace grounds, and attempting to speak to Seiryō at your mother's memorial. Both have been quite firm that Seiryō is not to be troubled, and Tokimi is impaired. They will ensure it can't happen again. If the agents truly want to help Seiryō, then they can find another means by which to do it."

"Thank you." Suki's eyes glittered with relief, and Sasami hugged her brother-in-law tightly.

"Tsunami won't fritz you, then." She said amiably. "I know helping Seiryō isn't something you always want to do, Takeru-niisan, but in this situation..."

"No." Takeru shook his head. "In this situation, I rather admire his actions. I have no siblings who I can protect in such a way, Sasami-chan — except, perhaps, you by my marriage to your sister. But I will soon have a son, Tsunami willing, and I already understand the desire to protect him with all my heart and soul. That Seiryō feels the same about Lady Suki makes me respect him more than I think I ever have done. That it was truly to protect you, Suki-sama, that he did all those things..."

He smiled.

"Besides, I have my own interests in helping keep Seiryō's name clean." He added. "With his training, he is by far and away the best qualified fighter on this planet at present. And I very much hope that he will give my son some guidance, when the time comes for him to learn such things. So it cannot hurt to establish a little good karma in

the meantime, between the Imada and the Tennan families. Don't worry, Lady Suki. As Sasami has said, we'll protect him from their probing as long as we can. And we'll certainly ensure that noone is arraigned for Lord Seiji's murder. The official Imperial view is that the death of Seiji Tennan was accidental. And if the subject is raised again, I'll ensure that that verdict does not change. No matter who says what!"

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

“You seem preoccupied this evening.”

As Tenchi and Ryoko walked through the darkening streets of Kurashiki, Tenchi shot his companion a concerned glance, taking in the distant, troubled look in her golden eyes and the uncharacteristic frown that marred her pretty, cheeky features. It was two days after Kenichi had been attacked in the streets of Osaka, and since the incident Ryoko had steered well clear of entering the city. Consequently that night, when Tenchi had sought her out, she had been sitting atop the shrine gateway, lost in thought, and when he had suggested they travel, the pirate had been reluctant to go anywhere near their favoured haunt.

She did not answer him now, and Tenchi frowned, nudging her gently with his arm.

“Ryoko?”

“Huh?” Ryoko turned now, offering him a startled glance. At his expression she smiled, a rueful look touching her face as she ran her fingers through her thick wavy hair.

“Wow, I’m giving the term space cadet some literal meaning tonight, huh?” She realised, and Tenchi nodded, returning the smile with a faintly relieved one of his own.

“Are you all right?” He asked softly. “You’ve been bothered a lot lately, but these last couple of days... and I was surprised that you didn’t want to go to Osaka this evening. Usually you jump at the chance of hitting the city and of scrambling my brains with your teleport to get there.”

“A change is as good as a holiday. Isn’t that your saying on the Earth?” Ryoko reflected, and Tenchi frowned.

“Yes, but...”

“I’m tired.” Ryoko admitted. “And planning a wedding is more difficult than I imagined. Just finding out all the information is confusing and muddling. I had no idea that getting married on the Earth would be such a difficult thing.”

“Is that it?” Tenchi looked surprised. “I know you were with Sakura again the other day — are you becoming a stressed bride to be, Ryoko? Because it’s not like you at all!”

“No...” Ryoko faltered, and to Tenchi’s dismay, he saw genuine pain in his fiancée’s golden eyes. “I just... everything seems to have got so complicated lately. That’s all.”

“Complicated how?” Tenchi’s brows knitted together. “Ryoko, talk to me. You usually do, you know. And we’ve been talking about marriage for a while, too — now I’m graduated, we both agreed it was what we wanted to do. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes...”

“So why are you suddenly so... funny?” Tenchi murmured. “Something’s bothering you and it bothers me that you won’t tell me what it is.”

“I guess it’s hard to explain.” Ryoko hazarded, pausing as she gazed up at the stars. “And I feel like I’ve not seen much of you these last couple of days.”

“Not seen me?” Tenchi eyed her for a moment, then, “I thought you weren’t bothered if Kane and I made up our fight... please tell me you’re not bothered by it now?”

“I don’t like him.” Ryoko said softly. “And I’m pretty sure he still hates me. That’s all.”

“Ryoko.” Tenchi fought against his frustration, shaking his head. “Kyoda has said to me that if it’s what I want, he’ll accept that I’m marrying you. I thought you’d accepted that he and I were friends again. Haven’t you?”

“It’s up to you. Not me. I just don’t trust him.” Ryoko sighed. “I’m sorry, Tenchi. I don’t want to talk about Kyoda tonight. If you like him, and trust him, fine. But he’s spending a suspicious amount of time with you for someone who was beating you to a pulp — or trying — the night of the graduation shindig. And the pirate in me finds it odd.”

“Well, tell the pirate in you to calm down.” Despite himself, Tenchi grinned, kissing her gently on the cheek. “Because nothing and noone — not even Kyoda — is going to come between us, Ryoko. I wouldn’t be marrying you if I wasn’t totally sure about that. Think of all the things we’ve been through, huh? And I’m sorry if you think Kyoda’s been monopolising my time — but in fairness you’ve been with Sakura just as much. It’s not abnormal to spend time with other friends.”

“I know.” Ryoko seemed to give herself a mental shake, offering him a smile that was very almost her usual cheeky grin. “I’m sorry. I guess this wedding thing is stressing me more than I thought. I realised how little I know about the Earth’s customs... that’s all.”

“Well, we’ll work through that.” Tenchi slipped his arm in hers, giving her a gentle tug as they continued walking down the street towards the town’s park. “Ryoko-chan, nothing in our lives has ever been conventional. It doesn’t follow that our wedding should be.”

“I know that.” Ryoko admitted. “But I want...”

She paused, as if trying to work out what to say, and Tenchi frowned, touching her cheek gently.

“What do you want?” He murmured. “Tell me.”

“I guess... to know that I really will belong here.” Ryoko admitted, and Tenchi stared at her, startled at her sudden confession.

“I thought you already felt the Earth was home?” He objected. Ryoko nodded slowly.

“I do. I have.” She agreed. “But you must’ve noticed it, Tenchi. Anti-alien feeling is growing. And I love the Earth. I love you. This is where I want to be, always. But I... I don’t want you to get hurt because you’re marrying me. And because I’m a settler. I don’t want people to think I mean trouble, either, and we both know what my track record is like. If that got to be common knowledge — hell, maybe in some circles it already is. Who knows these days? So I want us to get married properly. To prove to everyone that I am ready to become an honorary Earthling. And that I don’t want anything else than to be with the man I love.”

“Ryoko...” Tenchi’s eyes softened at this, and he slowly shook his head.

“I see.” He murmured. “So that’s it.”

“I guess.”

“I thought it didn’t matter what other people thought about us?” Tenchi pressed gently. “It certainly doesn’t matter to me. If it did, I wouldn’t be so sure as I am about what we plan to do.”

“Yes, I know.” Ryoko agreed. “But it is... getting worse. Maybe you don’t realise it, because you’re a native. At least, everyone thinks so — they don’t know about your connection to Jurai. But... some kid randomly went for me in the streets in Osaka the other day when I was with Sakura. He yelled a bunch of stuff at me — stuff about aliens

and whatever else. And I don't care what people say about me — or to me. But it's going to drag you under the radar. And Tenchi, I couldn't bear it if you got hurt by these nutjobs because you love me."

She ran her fingers through her hair, and Tenchi could see the agitation in her golden eyes.

"I just want to marry the man I love." She murmured. "Is that such a bad thing?"

"Of course not!" Tenchi gathered himself, shaking his head. "It's not a bad thing at all. And I'm sorry — I didn't realise someone had attacked you like that. Now I guess I understand. But really, don't worry about it."

He hesitated, then kissed her.

"I've fought evil princes, demons, and God knows what else over the past few years." He murmured. "I've faced ghosts and even travelled out of my body to bring you back to me. And I'll fight anyone and anything — even the people on the Earth — if it means we're together. So don't worry about it. You've done nothing wrong, and I won't have you feeling that you have. You're not to blame... and you and me, we're going to be fine. All right?"

"Tenchi..."

"I mean it. So snap out of this un-Ryoko-like daze and tease me or something." Tenchi ordered. "It's going to be all right. I promise."

To his relief, a smile touched Ryoko's lips, reflected in her golden eyes and she nodded, looping her arms around him.

"All right." She murmured. "I guess I'll have faith in you being right. After all, we have been through too much to let some pathetic Earthlings get to us. Right?"

"Right." Tenchi laughed. "Then now that's settled, let's go find dinner."

"Somewhere that's hot on the sake, too." Ryoko reminded him, and amusement flickered in Tenchi's eyes.

"That's more the fiancée I know and love." He teased. "All right. Message received loud and clear. Come on — lets go."

"You know, when I said I would help you, I did expect you to be around for me to report to."

Kiyone pushed open the door to Imaguchi's work office, an annoyed expression on her face as she surveyed the two startled Agents in turn. "I'm putting myself on the line a little here, and the next thing I find is that you've both decided to check out of Headquarters to take a little trip God knows where. Do you think that, if you're going to keep me involved in all of this, you could bother to tell me what's going on from time to time?"

"Kiyone-san!" Imaguchi gathered his wits, getting to his feet as he moved to close the door behind her. "We were just considering calling you, actually. Come on in and sit down."

"Did you listen to me?" Kiyone snapped, nonetheless doing as she was bidden as she sent him a dark glare. "What kind of help am I to you if you don't tell me when you're going to be around and when you're not? Don't you realise that my coming here a lot is going to look suspicious? I've been attacked for spying before and I don't want it to happen again!"

"On the contrary, if you're seen speaking to us a lot, it might be perceived that way." Imaguchi told her calmly.

"Our apologies, Detective." Takamura added. "We didn't realise you wanted to contact us so urgently. Hideki had the urge to go to Jurai again... and so we did."

At this point, a glance was exchanged between the two agents, and Kiyone frowned, realising that there had been something of a difference of opinion since the last time they had spoken. She settled herself more comfortably in her chosen seat, resting her elbows on Imaguchi's desk as she cast them both quizzical looks.

"Well?" She said softly.

"We've officially been asked not to return to Jurai without being summoned." Takamura said heavily.

"Sometimes I wonder what that Emperor is thinking." Imaguchi added. "Since we're trying to protect one of his own. Why is he making it so difficult for us? It's crazy."

"Probably because you decided to descend on the Tennan memorial, and you were caught by Lady Sasami." Takamura said evenly, and Imaguchi snorted.

"Whilst *you* were tagged asking questions of Tokimi." He retorted. "The blame isn't all with me, Ryou-kun. And besides, we are only doing our job. The Council are being unreasonable."

Kiyone let out an amused chuckle.

“So you got your wrists slapped because you were somewhere you shouldn’t be?” She asked lightly. “I see.”

“Maybe you had better luck.” Takamura reflected. “Kiyone-san, you spoke to Nakabito, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Two days ago now, thanks for asking.” Kiyone nodded her head, and Takamura looked rueful.

“Apologies again.” He said evenly.

“He seemed... very genuine.” Kiyone sighed. “In fact, if I hadn’t been warned by Mitsuru-sama and yourselves about his feelings where Seiryō was concerned, I’d... well, I’d believe him, I think. He was credible. Very credible. And he sounded like his interests were the universe’s.”

“But do you believe they are?” Imaguchi asked softly. Kiyone frowned, then slowly she shook her head.

“I have faith in Mitsuru-sama’s call on this matter.” She murmured. “And I have faith in Seiryō, too. So no. I don’t think so. I mean, he painted it well. And he did ask for my help... he even said at some point he might want me to go to the Earth as some kind of liaison for whatever it is he has planned. He gave the impression that he was backed into the position of investigating breaches of Intergalactic Space Law and he expressed concerns about Jurai. He also suggested that the man who died in prison there was murdered on Juraian orders, and that it wasn’t a suicide at all.”

“Mmm.” Takamura sighed. “This is the trouble. Nakabito is... a very dedicated, diligent officer. And he is thorough. He has a good record. And we’re unable to pin a damn thing on him at the moment. Not even from what you’ve just said... he didn’t let his guard down at all?”

“Nope. Not once.” Kiyone shook her head. “He was very convincing.”

She rubbed her temples.

“Unless this is all a misunderstanding and people aren’t really involved in what it seems to be.” She added helplessly.

“No... I don’t think so.” Takamura bit his lip, opening a folder on the desk and pulling out a sheet of paper. “How good is your forensic knowledge, Kiyone-san?”

“Not great. I don’t tend to spend much time digging around in corpses when I’m investigating a crime.” Kiyone shook her head, nonetheless taking the proffered sheet and glancing at it. “What am I looking at?”

“The autopsy report for the man who died in Juraian custody.” Takamura responded. “Admittedly, it was carried out by Juraian physicians, but I’ve no reason to doubt their report. It was quite thorough.”

“All these numbers mean something important, I imagine?” Kiyone asked, and Takamura nodded, coming to stand behind her. He ran his finger down the column of figures, pausing at one.

“This chemical was at about twenty times the normal level.” He said quietly. “It’s significant because it’s a compound not used on Jurai. It’s comprised entirely of minerals found on Kanemitsu. Additionally, it’s a commonly used chemical when extremists want to commit suicide. Hideki was involved in a raid not too long ago where ten or twelve people were taken into custody and searched. All of them had this compound on them in a small white pouch. In my mind that rules out murder. Haru-sama and his agents are wily and diligent, but they don’t have access to such crude base poisons. If they wanted to kill a man, they have chemical agents that are fairly untraceable except through specific expert tests. This isn’t the work of Jurai’s crown.”

“You make Haru-dono and his men sound sinister when you put it like that.” Kiyone shivered, and Takamura looked sheepish.

“I apologise.” He said. “I don’t mean that Lord Haru is the type to covertly kill prisoners anyway. But there are agents used in lethal injections in the rare cases of Juraian execution. Of course there are other... methods sometimes used, too. But Jurai is a highly skilled power. They would not use something so easy to trace on autopsy as this.”

“So the guy killed himself.” Kiyone set the sheet down. “Which makes Nakabito wrong on that topic at least.”

“Yes.” Imaguchi confirmed. “And we’ve learnt one other thing about the man, too. Ryou requested DNA readings from his corpse, before we fell foul of Jurai’s visitor policy, and he was granted it. We’ve traced the man’s identity a little more. His name was Kikobi and he belonged to an extremist group of terrorists known as the Kanemitsu Liberation Front.”

“How did you manage to find that out, if Jurai couldn’t?” Kiyone

eyed him warily, and Imaguchi grinned.

“I deal with a lot of terrorists.” He said evenly. “And those arrests Ryou mentioned were members of that group. They had planned to infiltrate and bomb the Juraian Representative Parliament on Kanemitsu about a month after the Sumire murders. As luck would have it, we still have all the data from that case on file. Twelve people were tried, but only eight convicted in the particular incident itself. The others got off with a warning, pretty much.”

He gestured to the sheet of paper.

“Kikobi was one of those four.” He added. “We had his DNA on file and we pulled a match.”

“I see.” Kiyone frowned. “Did you tell Jurai this?”

“If they don’t want us there, we don’t have any way of informing them of our progress.” Imaguchi said evenly. “So no. At present, we haven’t.”

“Kikobi is a small time criminal.” Takamura added. “Or I should say, he was. But Hideki did some digging into his background and discovered something interesting about him and his connections.”

“His... connections?”

“Kikobi’s last place of employment — before his arrest — was the Kanemitsu branch of the Juraian Research Facility of Munitions.” Imaguchi said frankly. “And the current director of that facility... is Akihiro Nakabito.”

“Naka...” Kiyone’s eyes widened, and Imaguchi grinned, nodding his head.

“Yes. *Our* Nakabito’s elder brother.” He agreed. “And so the threads begin to weave together into a pattern, don’t you think?”

“But it’s still not enough to get permission to raid Nakabito’s office or put him on suspension.” Takamura said regretfully. “If he’d slipped up with you, Kiyone-san, we might have been able to make a connection. But just because his brother might be involved in the terrorist attacks, it doesn’t mean that Junichi automatically is as well. And the trouble is, his mother was a woman who always pressed for *peaceful* negotiation between Kanemitsu and Jurai. She was one of the people slain aboard the Sumire by the demon known as Yugi... but she devoted her life and time to a peaceful political settlement. She hated the terrorist factions Kanemitsu sheltered.”

“She helped me on one or two of my enquiries.” Imaguchi agreed.

“Before her death.”

Kiyone’s eyes widened.

“Nakabito’s mother died on the Sumire?” She whispered, and Imaguchi nodded. “And Nakabito... is *from* Kanemitsu then?”

“Yes.” He agreed. “What about it?”

“He said that his father had been from the Earth so he wanted to protect it.” Kiyone murmured. “And he talked about the politics between Kanemitsu and Jurai. But he never told me that he was from there — or that his mother had died on the Sumire. Why would he tell me about his Father, then? Come to think of it, Mitsuru-sama told me his father disappeared when he was just a child. Would he be so interested in his father’s planet, if that was true — what was he trying to make me believe?”

“That he wants to protect the Earth, probably.” Takamura remarked.

“Which means he probably doesn’t, but thinks it’s a good way of getting to you.” Imaguchi concluded. “When we were students, Nakabito was fiercely proud, and very close to his mother and his brother. But his father... was a sore point. After he and Seiryō almost came to blows over that Yuriko girl, Seiryō tended to let it slide more and more, but before it — lets just say there were some pretty vehement arguments over Nakabito’s heritage from time to time. Seiryō was something of a snob... shall we put it that way? And Nakabito was proud. He’d often deny it, or try and squash the stories. But even so, the fact remains. Nakabito’s father took off and abandoned his mother with a newborn baby to care for. I can’t imagine he’d care all that much about the Earth considering that.”

“Well, he won’t fool me.” Kiyone said firmly. “I’m on Seiryō’s side, even if he does sound like he was a hell of a brat in all of this. I’m also on Sasami’s side. I’ve decided. But I’d like you two to trust me, if I’m trusting you. And not take off and disappear when I want to contact you. I think Nakabito’s probably not an enemy I want, and even more so now I’ve heard all of this. I want to know I’m safe and I can’t ask Seiryō for help.”

“All right. That seems fair.” Takamura nodded. “As I said, our trip to Jurai was random... it wasn’t expected to happen quite that way.”

“But we did learn two important things.” Imaguchi reflected. “One, that Seiryō knows nothing at all about any of this. And two...”

“That we really don’t understand the significance yet, but somehow

Seiji Tennan's death seems to be wound up in this somewhere." Takamura finished.

"Seiji Tennan's death." Kiyone's brows knitted together. "Really?"

"Tokimi seemed keen to tell me something about it, but Seiryō's sister prevented her." Takamura nodded. "And now, suddenly, Jurai don't want us even visiting without being summoned. That's not a coincidence."

"I suppose you can't enlighten us any on that subject?" Imaguchi asked hopefully, and Kiyone shook her head.

"I don't know anything about it." She responded. "Just that he died. Seiryō said he didn't kill his father. But he doesn't talk about it. He won't. He's always said that it's something best not discussed... and that it was an accident. That's all I know."

"Do you think Seiryō could have killed Lord Seiji?" Takamura asked, and Kiyone frowned.

"No." She said quietly. "I did, at first. When he assaulted me. But no. I don't think Seiryō killed Lord Seiji. I believe what he told me — that it was an accident. But I don't know what the details are. He hasn't told me that, and it's not something you can go around asking."

"Pity." Imaguchi drummed his fingers on the desk absently. "Strikes me that if *he* didn't kill Seiji-sama, then he knows who did. And he's protecting them. Heads of noble houses don't just 'accidentally die', you know. It's far too convenient, that no one else was involved. So someone else must be. And if Seiryō's hiding that information, it's probably either Tokimi or his sister that he's protecting. Unless Lady Kaede had more mobility in her later years than I've heard — but I'd put my money on the waif and stray or the sister."

"Suki or Tokimi?" Kiyone's eyes widened.

"That's the logical explanation." Takamura agreed. "And it's my feeling both Suki-sama and Tokimi knew something about it, too."

"The hearing indicates that it was Tokimi, under the lure of the Kii spell." Imaguchi reflected. "But if it's so simple and open a fact as that, I wonder at all the sudden secrecy."

"Whichever one of them he's protecting — or whoever, if there's an unknown quantity we're not prepared for — the truth of that event may well be the evidence we need to prove he's not acting on some covert Juraian scheme." Takamura grimaced. "Reading between the lines of Zero's testimony, it sounds very much like blackmail was used

to keep Seiryō involved in things. But we can't prove that without the evidence of the blackmail. And we don't even know where Zero is now."

"On the Earth, with Washu." Kiyone said evenly. "She's lived there, since everything happened with Tokimi."

"The Earth again, dammit." Imaguchi groaned. "Somewhere we can't go without exciting paranoia and suspicion."

"I have to speak to Washu anyway, though." Kiyone remembered. "I promised Nakabito that I'd put him in touch with her. I know that Washu will see right through him, if he's faking, and she's smart. Plus she and Seiryō are close friends... Tokimi is her sister, after all, and she might know more than I do, now she's reprogrammed Zero how she has. If I mention to her what I know so far... and then ask her to come and speak to you when she's spoken to Nakabito... would that help?"

"It would." Takamura's eyes flickered with relief. "After all, if Nakabito is the one who summoned her here... it would seem less strange to him that she would come."

"Right." Kiyone agreed.

"And if he trusts you, Kiyone-san, there is one other thing you can do for us."

Imaguchi pulled open the drawer of his desk, rummaging through the untidy bits and pieces until he found the thing he was looking for. He held it out, and Kiyone took it, glancing at it and then up at him uncomprehendingly.

"A data drive?"

"I want you to rip his computer, if you can." Imaguchi agreed. "You are trained to duplicate computer data, I trust?"

"Yes. I did it with the Tsubasa." Kiyone acknowledged. "But isn't that risky? I mean it's hard to explain..."

"If you can, it would help us out a lot." Takamura responded. "And Seiryō, too. If we can clear his name of the counts of Intergalactic breach we can start to pull apart this conspiracy and work out what's really going on."

"And you don't think that there might be security going into the office of someone who works with surveillance devices for a living?" Kiyone retorted. "I'm not fodder for your tricks and schemes, you know. He's probably got six thousand security cameras and other

devices wired in his office! What do you expect me to do about that? Not to mention the fact that he probably locks his door when he goes out. Most psychos who are planning world destruction bother to remember things like that!”

“Hey, calm down.” Imaguchi offered her a wry smile. “We’re not sending you in as a sacrifice to our cause. And it’s true that Nakabito’s office has sophisticated security systems. However... for every problem there is a solution.”

He rummaged once more in the drawer, pulling out a thin plastic card and glancing at it. He frowned, scanning the number printed along the side. Then he nodded, holding it out.

“You can think of this as a skeleton key.” He explained, as Kiyone took it, sending him a non-plussed look. “It’ll de-activate the secure locks on Nakabito’s office and temporarily disable any security software running within it. It was developed by a colleague of mine to help avoid anyone being caught inside the Annexe in a case of lockdown or emergency.”

“That doesn’t seem very secure.” Kiyone murmured. “If everyone has one.”

“Not everyone does.” Imaguchi admitted. He glanced at Takamura, who sent him a rueful smile, then, “Actually, *noone* else does. It’s a prototype — my colleague was working on it when other things... got in his way.”

“Other things?”

“Are you aware of the name Asoto Hirayama?”

“Oh.” Kiyone’s expression clouded and she nodded her head. “Yes. He was one of the agents murdered by the demon Yugi, wasn’t he? Here at Headquarters, while I was seconded to the Earth.”

“Yes, he was.” Imaguchi agreed. “And so his little toy never got beyond the testing stage.”

“So how do you have it?” Kiyone asked suspiciously. “Is it normal to raid the office of dead men or what?”

“Not at all.” Imaguchi said evenly. “Hirayama was a friend of mine — well, of both of ours. And he asked me to trial it with one of the cases I was working on at the time. In the end, I didn’t have to use it — and then he died, so I never got to return it to him. But it will deactivate all security locks and devices in an immediate vicinity for about a half hour period — maybe a little more. Enough to go do

some snooping around, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose." Kiyone nodded. "But why do I have to do it? Why not one of you?"

"Because the pair of us have a meeting with the Commander this morning." Takamura said darkly. "About why exactly we've been asked to steer clear of Jurai in the immediate future. And in light of that, it's probably better we keep our collective heads down. There's a possibility that Nakabito's already suspicious of us, or he might become so if he knows how often we've been visiting Jurai of late. That's a worst case scenario — we can't afford to let that happen."

"You really have been naughty boys." Kiyone observed wryly, and Imaguchi shrugged.

"Peril of this job, upsetting a few bigwigs." He said unrepentantly. "We'll fob the Commander off, but it means we're wasting time. Listen, Kiyone — none of us quite know what we're up against yet. But if there is some kind of violent event in the offing, every second counts. And of all people, Nakabito won't suspect you of spying on him. Us, he might. Like Ryou said, there's history there and he knows we'd take Seiryō's side in anything of this nature. But you're pretty much guaranteed to be safe. And you did say you wanted to be a part of this — didn't you? Wasn't that why you came here in the first place?"

"I guess it was." Kiyone admitted.

"Then you'll do it?"

"I'll try." Kiyone sighed, nodding her head as she realised she was beaten. "If I can, I'll try."

"Good girl." Imaguchi nodded approvingly. "And if you can speak to your friend Professor Washu, we'll keep looking into Akihiro Nakabito and his connections to the terrorist organisations on Kanemitsu. If we can tie Junichi into this, we will — and the sooner the better. Akihiro is a weapons expert — a real high flier in his field. And that doesn't bode well."

"He's supplying terrorists with weaponry?" Kiyone asked sharply, and Imaguchi shrugged.

"Maybe." He agreed. "But what concerns me more is that Kikobi was on Jurai a full week or so before he was caught. And although he had information on Seiryō's hearing in his custody at the time — we don't know what else he may have learnt or leaked in the meantime. Jurai's weapons program is second to none in the universe... it's a

worrying thought.”

“Then the sooner I speak to Washu the better.” Kiyone reflected. “If anyone understands space weaponry, it’s her.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

“I was under the impression we were trying to prevent the Earth from being invaded by alien forces.”

Kane cast his friend an amused glance, leaning up against the tree in the bustling Osaka park as he did so. It was the next afternoon and the two former students had gathered in the park, nominally to exchange notes on their undercover operation. However, Kane had soon discovered that Kenichi had something else on his mind — and that he had taken the trouble of inviting her to attend their little get together.

“Now you’re telling me that you’re using all of this to hit on a girl, Kenichi? What the hell is that about, huh? I thought that canvassing for opinions meant talking, not flirting and taking some strange woman back to your apartment with you.”

“Well, opportunism is an art, my friend.” Kenichi grinned unrepentantly. “Besides, Manami is *really* pretty. And she did save my life, one way or another. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I’m sure that Ryoko was involved somehow. Manami said she saw a guy at the scene and that he had some kind of gun... but I’m certain that he must have been an accomplice of Ryoko’s. I mean, who on this planet runs around with that kind of stun weaponry randomly shooting people?”

“From what I’ve heard, Kenichi, you were lucky not to be killed.” Kane became serious. “I guess this Manami really is your guardian angel. But can you trust her? I mean, do you think she’s okay?”

“She is.” Kenichi agreed. “We didn’t talk much about aliens, but she was clearly freaked out by the whole thing when I told her why I thought Ryoko had attacked me.”

He grinned widely.

“Besides, she’s a babe. And a smart babe, too.” He added. “Even if she does go back to Tokyo at the end of the week, I hope we’ll keep in touch. I like her.”

“Crap, you’re so fickle. You never change.” Kane snorted. “One meeting and you’re in love. You’re hopeless... I bet it lasts about as

long as she's in Osaka, and then she'll be forgotten."

"Maybe." Kenichi acknowledged. "But then, they do say long distance is an unnecessary stress. Let me alone, Kyoda-kun... maybe she has a cute friend or two that you can hook up with."

"And she's late." Kane glanced at his watch. "Are you sure she's coming at all? Maybe she's standing you up."

"This isn't about that." Kenichi glared at him. "We're not meeting here to talk about those things. If we were, believe me, you wouldn't be here. I want to involve her in everything else we're doing. Father says it's all right. He was freaked out as hell when he found out what happened to me. And he met Manami, the night we went out. He likes her too — he thinks she's the kind of person we can trust."

He shrugged.

"Plus, if she's from the capital, it couldn't be more perfect." He added. "Feeling in Osaka is strong, but there's still this open opinion in Tokyo and no one seems to have been watching the aliens there so much as we have here. They've got all that International Space Consortium stuff there and it's where the main links are to Jurai, so we need someone in there spreading the truth, don't we? Manami's the kind of person that folk will trust, and what better body to tackle than students? Students protest, we all know that. Idealism and everything else. Could it be more perfect?"

"I think you're crazy, but I'll bow to you." Kane sighed. "To be honest, I'd rather your chick was doing the messing. I'm getting fed up of spying on Masaki."

"Is he that dull company?" Kenichi looked startled, and Kane shook his head.

"No." He replied. "That's the trouble. We were always really good friends, before that woman came and upset everything. And I feel like I'm betraying his trust somehow. Even though I know your Father is right and he did the betraying first. It feels messed up, that's all. I don't like it. And the more time I spend with him, the less I learn, to be honest. He's a dope when it comes to things like this. He won't have a clue about any of the implications and there's no way he's any more involved in this than his connection to that pirate. I'm sure about it. He's Tenchi Masaki — if Jurai are that smart, they wouldn't touch him with a barge pole. He's too much of a nice guy. He's not the kind to betray his planet knowingly."

"Well, didn't you say you were meeting up with him later on this

afternoon?" Kenichi asked. Kane nodded. "Then I'll come too. I've not seen Masaki in a long time, and it might be useful to have a second opinion."

"Kenichi-kun!"

Before Kane could respond, there was a yell from across the grass and the two young men turned, Kane seeing a dark haired girl hurrying towards them, anxiety in her aqua eyes as she approached the tree.

"I'm so so sorry." She exclaimed breathlessly, grasping Kenichi's hands as she sent him an apologetic look. "My train was late, and then I got held up by roadworks and had to take a detour. I didn't mean to keep you waiting so long."

"It's all right." Kenichi offered her a grin, shaking his head. "We've not been here that long. And you can't help public transport."

"I guess you must be Kyoda-san." The girl cast Kane a warm smile, and despite himself, Kane found he was returning it. "I'm Manami Kurashida... pleased to meet you. You and Kenichi-kun are old friends, right? Kenichi said you've known each other a long time."

"Yes." Kane nodded. "Kane Kyoda. Pleased to meet you, too... he's not really shut up about you since you ran into one another, to be honest."

Manami looked surprised as Kenichi reddened, shooting his friend a dark glare.

"Shut up, Kane." He said warningly, and Manami shook her head.

"No, I'm flattered." She admitted. "That you'd be thinking of me. I'm sure there must be much more important things to have on your mind."

"Nothing as pretty, however." Kenichi gathered himself, and Manami laughed, her cheeks pinkening.

"You say stupid things." She scolded. "Stop it."

"Yes, stop it." Kane instructed. "You already said this wasn't a date — this is business. So quit flirting with her, Kenichi. You have plenty of time to do that when I've gone home — but I don't want to lose my lunch playing piggy in the middle with the pair of you."

"Fine, fine." Kenichi held up his hands in mock surrender. "I'm sorry. Yeesh. All right. Business. Down to that."

"Why did you call me up like this anyway, Kenichi?" Manami asked

curiously. "Is it about... what you said... the other day?"

"Yes." Kenichi nodded. "And you said then that you'd help me — didn't you?"

"Yes." Manami nodded her head, and Kane was relieved to see the resolution flickering in her aquamarine eyes. "I like the Earth and I don't want anyone to destroy it. So if you think it's in danger, I want to help."

She shrugged, looking sheepish.

"It's an extension of my control complex, I guess." She admitted ruefully. "I see a crisis and I want to dive right in. It's why I want to be a doctor, remember? And this is the same. I can't just stand back and ignore it, if people need my help."

"Well, people do." Kane said grimly. "How much do you know already, Manami-san?"

"Just Manami, please." Manami settled herself more comfortably on the ground, offering him a conspiratorial grin. "I don't believe in formality. And as for how much — not much. Just that there's some pirate woman in Osaka who seems perfectly safe and ordinary but actually she's some kind of... what? Homicidal maniac? And that her friend was the one who shot Kenichi — is that right?"

She glanced at Kenichi as if for confirmation, and Kenichi nodded.

"That's what I think." He agreed. "Which means associating with me might be dangerous for you — are you okay with that?"

Kane rolled his eyes at the faint swagger in his friend's tones, but Manami smiled, nodding her head.

"I'm all right with it." She agreed. "I like you, and I want to help. I'm not easily scared, either. You can't be, studying medicine."

"True... you people cut up dead bodies a lot, don't you." Kenichi reflected, and Manami nodded.

"More than you'd like to know." She added dryly. "Yes. I've seen my fair share of cadavers in my time. I'm not scared. What do you want me to do?"

"You're from Tokyo, aren't you?" Kane asked, and Manami nodded again.

"Yes, usually. Why?"

"Father's concerned that the anti-alien feeling hasn't properly

reached the capital, and he thinks there's something dangerous coming." Kenichi explained. "A friend of his — of ours — has given us a lot of information about this Jurai planet that makes them look a lot less cuddly and friendly than their propaganda would have us believe. I think I told you that. We need to make people aware, but it's difficult to get the word out. Even with Dad's connections and the internet, it's not spreading as quickly as we'd like. But if you're a student in the capital — you must be a member of some student body or other, mustn't you?"

"Yes." Manami agreed. "I see. So you want me to put word about — generate awareness in Tokyo about all of this when I go home at the end of the week?"

"Yes." Kane replied. "Do you think you can?"

"I can try." Manami pursed her lips. "I mean, I know a few important people on campus, and if I could get them to pick up on this, I expect it'll spread around the place like wildfire. We're quite an active student council as a rule, you know — we've stood up for several issues within the university over the past couple of years. I'm sure I could find people who'd get this about."

She smiled, casting Kenichi a coy glance.

"If it would help you, I'll do that." She added.

"It would." Kenichi returned the smile. "Very much indeed."

"Well, people often don't understand things so clearly by themselves." Manami reflected, glancing up absently at the clouds. "About life and everything else. They take it for granted that they'll always have a new day that they can experience. That they'll feel joy and sadness, and appreciate the colours and the sensations around them. For someone to take that away... would be a terrible thing."

"Yes." Kane shot her a surprised look. "You've really been thinking about this hard, haven't you?"

"Well, I have." Manami admitted, looking embarrassed. "You see, I'll tell you the truth. I... I didn't always want to be a doctor. In fact, I didn't always care about doing anything like that. But when I was... younger, I was... hurt. I was doing some... work in a lab, and I came into contact with a power surge that badly injured my body and my mind. And as I recovered, I guess I truly saw the world for the first time. I realised that things had colours and shades. That feeling something wasn't just something to take for granted — but something to be cherished. So I wanted to be involved in everything, and make

some kind of contribution. Somehow. To make sure that other people didn't take life for granted the way I had. I wanted to make people happy, instead of just ignoring how they felt. Is that silly?"

"No, it's not." Kenichi said softly. "I had no idea you'd been through anything like that."

Manami spread her hands, shrugging.

"I was lucky." She said frankly. "I was able to recover, and I don't regret that it happened to me. I have far more of a life now than I did then, because I understand everything so much better. And I love this world more than you can ever imagine, believe me. I won't let anyone hurt it."

"See, I told you she was on our side." Kenichi shot Kane a glance, and Kane shrugged, grinning.

"Guess so." He acknowledged, relief curling in his heart as he registered the sincerity in Manami's words. "Then it's all right. And you'll spread the word in Tokyo, Manami? Ishida-san thinks there's something coming, and so does his friend, Nakabito-san. We need to be ready. Whatever happens -we need to be prepared. And we need to show them that they can't push us around or tell us how to live. This is our planet, it's not their holiday spa. We have the right to live here just as we please... and they're not going to make us change that."

"All right." Manami dimpled. "I'll do the best I can."

"Hey, Kane, where did you say you were meeting Masaki?" Kenichi asked at that moment, and Kane looked startled.

"Masaki?" He echoed. "Outside the library. Why?"

"Ain't that him, there?" Kenichi gestured across the grass. "With that weird geekish friend of his — what's his name?"

"Ikeda." Kane's brows knitted together. "Yeah — guess it is."

"Is it a problem, him seeing you with me?" Kenichi wondered, and Kane shook his head.

"Doubt it. He barely knows who you are." He responded. "Besides, it's too late. They've seen us now. I haven't squared things with Ikeda yet — but I guess this is as good a chance as any — if I really want to be believable."

"Believable?" Manami's eyes flickered with consternation. "Is this Masaki person not a friend of yours, then?"

"He is and he isn't. It's complicated." Kane ran his fingers through

his hair. "He's sold us out, basically. That pirate woman — that Ryoko. He's dating her. He's completely blind to the alien threat, and he's putting everyone in danger by being so oblivious. I hate it, but I've been keeping tabs on him. I want to learn something — not that I'm having much luck. It sucks but I can't see what else to do."

"Then maybe I should leave you to it, if they're coming this way." Manami suggested, but Kenichi shook his head, reaching out to grasp her by the hand.

"No need." He said with a warm grin. "Masaki barely knows me. He won't even register you. He's been alien bewitched, after all — don't fret it. Besides, he's like Kane said. He's a dope. He's Earth's Mr Nice. He's as duped as the rest of this planet — just don't mention any of the stuff we've said while he's here, all right?"

"You have my word." Manami's expression clouded, but she obediently settled herself back down. "If you think it's okay, I'll stay."

"Kyoda!" At that moment Tenchi and his companion reached them, and Kane raised his hand in a wave, offering him a grin.

"Masaki-kun." He said warmly. "I thought I wouldn't see you till later on!"

"Me too." Tenchi grinned back. "But I had some errands to run, and Ryoko's holed herself up in the mountains at present — she seems to have a dislike of Osaka since graduation, so I dragged Ikeda out to help me."

"He's such a good friend like that." Hiroshi said frankly, casting Kane a glance, and Kane met it bravely, offering him a smile.

"Ikeda-san, I'm glad to see you too." He said softly. "You know that Masaki and I have straightened things, right? That we're not fighting any more?"

"Hey, it's all good with me." Hiroshi shrugged. "I'm glad you've dropped the psychosis, though — seriously. It's not good for you."

"Well, we're fine now." Kane said lightly.

He gestured to his companions.

"You guys remember Kenichi Ishida?"

"Yes, just about." Tenchi bowed his head in acknowledgement of the other graduate. "Afternoon, Ishida-san."

"Hi, Masaki-kun. Long time no see." Kenichi responded with a warm grin of his own. "Ikeda-san, you too."

Tenchi opened his lips to speak, but then he caught sight of Kenichi's young companion and he faltered, confusion flickering in his expression.

"Masaki?" Kane frowned. "Something wrong?"

"I..." Tenchi faltered, as if he was trying to work something out, and Kane's frown deepened, his gaze darting from his friend to the young girl that sat at Kenichi's side. To his surprise, there was a flicker of alarm in her gaze too.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" At length Manami spoke, fixing Tenchi with a distressed look. "I don't understand — is something the matter?"

"I..." Tenchi hesitated once again, then, "*Yume?*"

"Yume?" Kenichi's brows knitted together. "Who the hell is Yume? This is Manami... what do you mean?"

"Isn't Yume the name of your housekeeper?" Hiroshi stared at his friend as if he'd lost his mind. "Masaki, what's eating you?"

"It... I thought..." Tenchi's gaze was still fixed on Manami, who shivered, glancing at Kenichi for support.

"Tell him to stop it." She begged. "He's creeping me out, looking at me that way."

"But..." Tenchi protested. "I thought... surely... Yume..."

"I think someone's had too much traipsing round the city this morning." Hiroshi looked as bemused as anyone. "Masaki, Yume's in the mountains. Isn't she?"

"Yes... but..."

"Then snap out of it." Hiroshi ordered. "Geez, what's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"If I'm just going to be stared at by someone, I'm going to go home." Manami objected. "It's weird."

"Yes, Masaki, quit gawping at the poor girl." Kane instructed. "She's not Yume, Kenichi already told you. Even if she looks like her."

"She doesn't." Tenchi seemed to rouse out of his daze at this, turning to meet Kane's gaze with a preoccupied one of his own. "I'm sorry. I guess for a moment I had a mental blackout, or something. I could've sworn — but I guess I was wrong. I thought for a moment I knew your companion, but I... I guess I don't know her at all."

At this his gaze flitted back to Manami, and Kane was struck by the flicker of dismay that flared in the girl's aqua eyes.

"I'm going home." She said frankly. "Kenichi, call me and we'll get together before I go back to Tokyo. Okay? We've finished our conversation, anyway — and I have other things I have to do. But next time you want your friends to come stare at me, Kane-kun, please tell them not to. I don't like it... okay?"

With that she got to her feet, pausing to kiss Kenichi gently on the cheek, then heading purposefully across the grass towards the park exit.

At her departure, Kenichi let out his breath in a rush.

"Dammit, Masaki, did you have to scare her like that?" He demanded. "What got into you anyway? Gawping at the girl just because you thought she looked like someone you knew?"

"Yume has lilac eyes." Hiroshi added. "She didn't look anything like Yume at all."

"I guess I'm just a weirdo, then." Tenchi sank down onto the grass, rubbing his temples. "I'm really sorry, Ishida-kun. I didn't mean to... I'm sorry."

"Well, I guess she'll still speak to me." Kenichi reflected. "But gee — you really need to learn how to deal with women a little better. Are you really getting married soon? I find it hard to believe, if that's how you handle girls."

"My fiancée..." Tenchi faltered, then shrugged. "Ryoko and I are a little different from your average couple in that respect, I suppose."

"No kidding." Hiroshi said ruefully, and Tenchi cast him a sheepish smile.

"Right." He agreed.

"Well, since we've lost the prettiest member of the party to Masaki's awkward social skills, how about the four of us catch a movie or something?" Kenichi suggested. "There are some good films playing at the moment — what do you say?"

"Masaki?" Kane cast Tenchi a glance, and the young prince hesitated, then he nodded his head.

"All right." He agreed. "Since we're here... Ikeda, are you up for it?"

"Hell, why not. It seems forever since we hung out anyway,

Kyoda.” Hiroshi nodded, adjusting his glasses. “I’m game. Let’s do it!”

Dammit.

From her vantage place behind a nearby tree, Yume watched the four young men leave, inwardly berating her own carelessness.

“He saw me.” She murmured. “Even with Manami’s features modified, he still knew who I was. And I came very close to giving myself away, too. Kyoda looked at me funny — I have to be careful. Especially since Kenichi said my name — I’m sure Tenchi must’ve made the connection. And just when I was getting close! Kane even mentioned that Nakabito guy as an associate of Kenichi’s father, so we must be chasing the right track! I hope Tenchi won’t give me away by saying something stupid. I guess I’ll just have to hope for the best — Washu won’t be pleased if I put the whole thing in jeopardy just because I didn’t manage to make a tactical exit when I should have done.”

She sighed, glancing at her hands as she morphed her features back into the more familiar ones of the Masaki housekeeper-turned-laboratory assistant. Then she closed her eyes, focusing her sensors on the mountain home that had become her sanctuary since her arrival just more than a year before.

“More than anything I want to protect this place. And Tenchi and Ryoko. And everything.” She murmured. “But it’s difficult. Listening to them talk — they’re misguided and ignorant, but they... they only want to preserve what they already know, that’s all. They’re afraid to lose the stability they’ve always had. And I understand that better than they realise. When I first became Yume — I wanted to hang on to being Zero because her rigidity and impassiveness was safe and secure. I knew it — I understood function and routine.”

She sighed, as she hazed into view on the walkway to the shrine, leaning up against the trunk of one of the cherry trees as she watched the scattering pink petals dart in the wind, settling on the ground at her feet. Slowly she held out her hands to catch one, glancing at it as a sense of sadness watched over her.

“They don’t understand that for me, Yume was freedom. Yume was life. My *dream*.” She whispered. “And even though I was afraid at first to embrace it, I know now that I wouldn’t go back. More, I *can’t* go back. And nor can the Earth. It didn’t know, before. But now it does. And it couldn’t see the universe in all its glory, then. But now... now it can. It has the opportunity to really live as part of it all — not just a

remote rock, isolated from everything, but as a part of a huge intergalactic family. They don't know that, if they can only get past their fear, there are so many good things in the universe that they can experience. Tenchi and Ryoko are proof of that step."

She released her grasp on the petal, letting it fall slowly to the ground to join its fellows.

"Like the sakura, everything needs to begin somewhere." She murmured. "And everyone is afraid of change. But winter comes before the spring. And Zero came before Yume. I don't know how to make them understand that. Kenichi... Kane... they are good people. I'm sure of it. Kane really seems upset that he's betraying his friendship with Tenchi over this. There must be a way to reach these people. But Manami... Manami's sworn herself to the Earth's side in some war now. It's too late for her to be a missionary for peace."

"Yume."

The sound of the priest's voice made her start and she turned, offering him a smile as he approached her.

"Katsuhito-dono." She murmured. "I'm sorry. I guess I was just staring into space, thinking about the Earth and how scared some of the people are of where we've all come from."

"Ah yes. The eternal question of acceptance." Katsuhito nodded his wizened head, a knowing look glittering in his red eyes. "The age-old crisis of mankind — whether or not to welcome the stranger with food and kindness, or to hold him at blade-point until he states his business?"

"Yes." Yume confirmed. "And the Earth — they're thinking along the latter lines. Doesn't it worry you?"

"It's not an Earth failing. It's an instinct in all living beings, in all worlds, everywhere." Katsuhito shook his head. "People fear what they don't understand — but they also fight the things they think threaten them. I've lived here long enough to see that the men of Earth and the men of Jurai are very much the same in many ways. And I believe that, given time, Earth will understand. It just requires the time to trust in those of us who are here long-term."

"I suppose so." Yume nodded. "You see, I don't really know where I fit into this. I am, I suppose, an alien. I mean, I wasn't created on the Earth. But then, I'm not technically alive. Not in the same way... I don't have an ethnic origin, or a family, or a background. I'm just Yume. And that makes it easier for me, perhaps, to swear my heart to

the Earth. This was the first planet that was my home, after all.”

“You and Ryoko both, in some respects.” Katsuhito said wisely. “But you’d be surprised. Yume, so long as you have hopes and dreams, you are alive. And so long as you have love for the Earth, you are an Earthling. Where you are born is immaterial. Like Ryoko, like myself — you’ve made this your spiritual home. That’s all that matters. And the Earth will come to know this. And to learn what I already know.”

He grinned at her.

“My father wouldn’t attack the Earth.” He said softly. “Because I’m here. And so is Tenchi. And even if he was angry at us, Yume, he wouldn’t do it. Even if for some reason he hated us both — which, for the record, I don’t believe he does. My father is a clever man, and he knows that, in his heart, he wouldn’t win such a conflict of wills.”

“What do you mean?” Yume’s eyes widened, and Katsuhito chuckled.

“Why do you suppose it was first myself and then Tenchi who fought Kagato?” He asked lightly. “Why us, and not Jurai’s Emperor Azusa? Yes, my father is a powerful man. He wields Jurai’s power admirably. But I surpass him, and Tenchi surpasses me. There is only one in the universe more powerful than my grandson, and that is Tsunami herself. And Tsunami has a deep-rooted love for the Earth, also — do you think that Princess Sasami would condone any kind of assault on the planet where she and Ayeka were so free and happy?”

“No.” Yume agreed. “But how do you make the Earth understand that without making them know who you and Tenchi really are?”

“Perhaps it will come to that.” Katsuhito admitted. “But I’m not worried. I have faith in Tenchi — I always have had. In the end, it will all be well. I’m sure of that.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“You’ll see that I am.” Katsuhito smiled broadly. “Well, I must go to the shrine — I have much to do. If you haven’t any other errand, Yume, would you mind sweeping some of the blossoms from the pathway? I’d hate anyone to have a fall.”

“Oh. Yes. Sure.” Yume nodded, smiling. “If you like. And Katsuhito-dono?” As the old man turned to leave.

“Yes?” The priest turned back to look at her. “What is it?”

“I’ll try and share your faith in Tenchi.” Yume said softly. “After all, I know I love him. And you should have faith in those you love...”

right?”

“Indeed.” The priest’s eyes twinkled. “Do that, and you won’t go far wrong. Thank you, Yume. I know I can trust the pathway to your careful attentions!”

With that he was gone in the swirling pink-flecked wind, and Yume paused, glancing up at the branches of the trees as they swayed in the breeze.

“Have faith.” She murmured. “Well, I hope so. But just in case, when I’ve cleared up here, I should report to Ryoko and Washu about what just happened. After all — I don’t know what Tenchi’s thinking right now. And maybe it is better if he knows what’s going on. But Washu should at least be aware... that we might have more trouble than we first thought!”

“So, that’s the way of it.”

Washu sat back from her computer screen, pursing her lips as she glanced over the data she had already gleaned. “Nakabito, Junichi. An Agent of the Galaxy Police Elite or an agent of destruction, that’s what I want to know? Is it a complete coincidence that your brother is involved in arms development, or that your mother was connected to the Kanemitsu negotiations? I doubt it, somehow. This requires much more investigation, and I’m starting to worry that we don’t have the time. Considering those amendments made to the defences of the Earth — they can’t be accidental. If Nakabito’s brother really is as much of a hotshot as this seems to suggest, is it possible that it’s his work? Or at least, the work of Kanemitsu infiltrators?”

A red light flashed across her screen at that point and she frowned, reaching across to touch the communications switch.

“Incoming call?” She murmured. “Friend or foe?”

She keyed in her passcode, waiting for the connection to be established, and as she interpreted the call number, her green eyes widened with surprise.

“Yagami?” She breathed. “Kiyone? Is that you?”

“Washu!” Kiyone’s face flashed up on the screen, a mixture of relief and apprehension in her sapphire eyes. “Thank goodness! I hoped I’d be able to reach you!”

“That sounds ominous, Kiyone-chan.” Washu said wryly, folding her arms casually across her chest. “Why would a Detective of the

Galaxy Police be so urgently trying to make contact with a little sub-space lab minding its own business in the Japanese mountains of Earth, I wonder? Could it have something to do with Junichi Nakabito and the corruption within the Galaxy Police, by any chance?"

For a moment, Kiyone looked floored. Then she chuckled.

"Which just proves that the little sub-space lab in question has been far from minding its own business." She said astutely. "All right, I should have known you'd already be aware something was going on — knowing the way that you work. And I'm glad you do — it makes my job a little easier."

"I suppose that depends on exactly what you want from me." Washu reflected. "I feel like I know bits and pieces of something, that's the truth. But... well, you tell me what's inspired you to call me, and we'll work from there. If you know something I don't, I think I'd like to be filled in."

"It sort of began with Seiryō." Kiyone admitted, and Washu looked startled.

"Seiryō's wound up in all of this?"

"Not actively." Kiyone shook her head. "In fact, he knows nothing about any of it. You do know that his mother passed away recently, Washu? Or maybe you don't... he did say he tried to contact you, but he couldn't get through."

"I scrambled all signals a while ago, because of work I was doing on the Kii rock from Rikishouki." Washu's expression became grave and she shook her head. "I didn't know. I'm sorry for it, too. I only opened channels again recently because of all of this — I haven't spoken to anyone on Jurai and I didn't know Lady Kaede's condition had reached that point. I'll be sure to send a message to Jurai as soon as I can."

"I'm sure he'll be glad." Kiyone agreed. "The honest truth is, Washu, that he's a mess. A literal, complete mess. He won't let his guard down and show people, but it's the truth anyway. And when he called me to cancel a meeting we had arranged, I knew that it was a big deal. So I went to Jurai for a few days — just because he obviously needed a friend and I guess I was the best he could manage."

"I'm sure he had no objections to your company." Washu said lightly, and Kiyone shrugged.

"I nagged him a bit." She admitted. "But no, I think he was glad I was there. But I couldn't stay long. And while I was there, Washu, I

spoke to Sasami and Kamidake, too. They told me about some weird stuff that had been happening on Jurai in recent weeks. Kamidake — and Sasami too — they thought I should know because my name came into the equation. Some spy from Kanemitsu had snuck through Jurai's security and had been leaking information to someone. Some of which was information about Seiryō's hearing and my testimony against him after Kihaku was destroyed."

"I see." Washu's eyes narrowed. "Interesting."

"I could think of other words for it." Kiyone said frankly. "Anyhow, from what I gathered, the leak seemed to be connected with the Galaxy Police somehow. So I told Sasami I'd see what I could find out and if I discovered anything important, I'd forward it to Jurai. Thing is, I haven't been able to do that yet. When I got back to Headquarters I had a summons waiting for me — from Junichi Nakabito."

"Ah-hah." Washu pursed her lips. "And you thought it was strange?"

"Very strange. Very convenient, considering everything." Kiyone admitted. "Anyhow, as it happened, I had a little time before he wanted to see me, so Mihoshi and I took a trip to Seniwa so I could consult her father. He's someone whose opinion I trust completely, and I think he's beyond corruption. So I wanted to know what he thought. And it turns out that he taught both Seiryō and Nakabito at the Galaxy Police Academy. More, that the two of them were rivals. Very, very fierce rivals. In fact, Nakabito hates Seiryō even now. I've no idea how Seiryō feels, because I've not discussed it with him. But it sent up a few red flags."

"I imagine it would." Washu drummed her fingers absently on the unit. "Since this spy had information on Seiryō's hearing, and then Nakabito wanted to speak to you. So you met with him, then?"

"Yes." Kiyone agreed. "And he seems very on the level, but I don't think he is. There are a couple of other Agents here who are acting to try and get to the bottom of everything too. They're old friends of Seiryō's, although they're getting a lot of closed doors from Jurai and they think it has something to do with Seiji Tennan's death. Actually, they're pretty hot on the idea that Seiji's death was murder. But that aside, they think Jurai are protecting Seiryō, when in fact they're preventing him from helping to clear his name. They — and I — think that someone's gearing up something to use Seiryō as a scapegoat. And that somehow the Earth is involved. And... if you know about this... the Earth must be involved. Mustn't it?"

“Bingo.” Washu nodded her head. “Though I’m surprised you’re putting yourself out like this, Kiyone. Didn’t you already learn that spying on the Elite of the Galaxy Police is a risky procedure?”

“I know, but I’m in too far to back out now.” Kiyone admitted. “Anyhow, Nakabito thinks I’m sympathetic to his cause because I testified against Seiryō and I’m letting him believe it. He expressed a desire to speak to you too — I think he knows that you testified too, although I don’t think he has your actual testimony. The Agents I’m colluding with — Imaguchi and Takamura — they do. They’ve seen the tapes of the whole sordid event. And they want to talk to you, too.”

“My, I am popular, aren’t I?” Washu laughed. “And I suppose that this is a sort of summons on the behalf of both, then?”

“Mm.” Kiyone looked sheepish. “If you can spare the time to come. The truth is, if you come see Nakabito, he won’t be suspicious at you being at Headquarters. And I figured you could maybe speak to Imaguchi and Takamura aboard Yagami — maybe — if you don’t mind. Because that way, Nakabito won’t think anything is odd.”

“I guess I could do that.” Washu agreed. “The truth is, I would like to speak to him myself. Kiyone, you’re not wrong to connect this to the Earth. I think you’ve hit the nail on the head — I think that from what you’ve said, this is a political battle between Jurai and Kanemitsu, only Jurai are the mouse and not the cat for once. You know that I’ve worked on the defence program for this planet since they became aware of us being here, right?”

“Yes, of course. What of it?”

“When I went to check on their progress a few days ago, I found some serious deviations from my plans.” Washu admitted. “The shields should be powerful enough to keep out most enemy fire. But they’d been altered to a different angle... an angle which would not only not protect the Earth, but actually magnify the impact of any such attack — should one occur.”

Her expression became grim.

“I think it would be unlikely that such an attack is not in the offing.” She added darkly. “It’s just a matter of when or where. Plus, this Nakabito has been on the Earth, too. Yume saw him, and her digital memory allowed us to pull an ident. There’s bad feeling here against settlers, particularly Juraians and it’s growing. Paranoia, suspicion — all of these things. I’m pretty sure this Nakabito is the one pulling the strings, so I’ve sent Yume to spy on his Earth associates.

But I'm worried I'm running out of time. Already there's been one incident where Ryoko was almost attacked in the street because this Nakabito seemed to be trying to set her up in a situation where she attacked a civilian. Fortunately for all of us, Ryoko's temper is not what it was — and she cares about being here too much so far to let rip at anyone. But she's angry and frustrated, and I am too. For once in her life she's done nothing to deserve it."

"That sucks." Kiyone murmured. "And if you're right, then you think Nakabito and his associates plan on blowing up the Earth and then, what? Making Jurai a scapegoat?"

"Probably." Washu agreed. "And from what you've said, I imagine that they'll be using Seiryō as target suspect number one."

She shrugged.

"He is the one with the past, after all." She added. "And you said yourself that Nakabito hates him. Whatever his reasons for doing so, I'm sure he'd love to lay this at his old rival's door."

"Yeah, I guess so." Kiyone's blue eyes darkened with anger. "So that's it. Turn the Earth paranoid, convince them there's a war coming, and then if the planet is attacked and people happen to survive, the blame will still be on Jurai no matter what. It's sick and twisted... I'm glad I'm involved, if that's the case. What Seiryō did to tick Nakabito off might've been bad, but this is no way to take your revenge!"

"Sounds like a juicy story for a less chaotic conversation." Washu reflected. "All right. So you think I should come to Headquarters? Or would you like me to send Nakabito a memo telling him that you've contacted me and that I'd be delighted to meet with him at his convenience?"

"The latter." Kiyone decided. "I'm sorry to have brought you into it, but as much as anything, I'd like you to meet him. I'd like your perspective."

"Then I'll come with pleasure." Washu assured her. "Just as soon as I've seen Yume, and debriefed her on the latest step of her mission."

"Takamura and Imaguchi asked about her, too." Kiyone remembered. "They seem to think she has information about Seiji's death."

"Kiyone, I want you to divert their attention from that event as much as you can." Washu said seriously. "It's past, and it has no bearing on the present."

Kiyone's eyes narrowed.

"You know what happened, don't you?" She said accusingly, and Washu nodded her head.

"Yes." She said briefly. "But it would be futile to speak to her, anyway. The files Yume had in her memory have been erased. I saw to that myself."

"So you're in on it... you're protecting whoever it is Seiryō's protecting, too?" Kiyone asked. Washu smiled.

"Seiji Tennan's death was an accident." She said softly. "Whatever you think you know, Kiyone, that is the truth of it. Nobody meant to kill the man. He died by his own misadventure. That is the honest truth. And no good can come of digging out the facts of it again. Particularly not if Seiryō is in such a delicate state of mind. He did not kill his father, and he and Suki are now orphans with only one another and Tokimi to turn to. Let it go and worry about this instead. Your Agents are wrong if they think that discovering the truth of Seiji's death will help Seiryō any. It won't. They'd do better to focus on exposing Nakabito than they will by focusing on Seiryō's family history. After all, it seems blatantly clear to me that Nakabito's our villain — not Seiryō."

"All right. I get it." Kiyone sighed. "But you can tell them yourself to leave off. I don't have the authority to do that, and I don't know anything about it, anyway. Seiryō hasn't told me and nor has anyone else. Takamura and Imaguchi have their theories, but just that — theories."

"Yume had video evidence of the event in her hard drive. I witnessed this before we agreed between us that it would be better erased." Washu said softly. "I have no theories on the event. I know the facts of it. And I will tell you again — Seiji Tennan died by misadventure. His death was no one's fault but his own. He was foolish... and he paid the price for it. He was not murdered."

She smiled.

"I would not have concealed it from Jurai's court, if he had been." She added. "I had no reason to defend Seiryō's cause then, after all — did I?"

"No. And I trust you." Kiyone reflected. "If you say it's that way, I believe you."

She smiled.

“I’m glad, to be honest, even if I don’t totally understand the secrecy.” She added. “I didn’t want it to have been murder.”

“Well now you can put your mind at rest, can’t you?” Washu returned the smile. “And move onto more important things. Such as — I assume you know that Akihiro Nakabito is involved in arms development, and that he recently placed a large company order from various facilities and warehouses external to Jurai’s empire for a new project?”

“A new...?” Kiyone faltered. Washu nodded.

“Paid for using untraceable methods.” She added. “Suspicious, isn’t it?”

“If it’s untraceable, how did you trace it?” Kiyone demanded, and Washu laughed.

“I’m not your average hacker.” She said airily. “I have my ways and means. But some of the things he’s buying in look potentially dangerous to my mind. I don’t know what exactly he’s building, but I have hacked his company’s records and there’s nothing in the official plans which require some of the components he’s importing.”

“Imaguchi said that the spy on Jurai was once an employee of that place.” Kiyone said thoughtfully, and Washu nodded.

“I imagine there are probably others with extremist sympathies working in the organisation.” She agreed. “Having an arms plant on Kanemitsu is like giving an unstable man a gun and bullets and leaving him to play with them. It’s bad judgement on the part of Jurai’s government, and they’re going to pay for it if they’re not careful. They seem to think that they govern these planets and so they can control their actions. But I doubt they have any idea how dark some of the plots on Kanemitsu have become since the Sumire murders.”

“Nakabito’s mother died on the Sumire, Washu.” Kiyone remembered, and Washu chewed on her lip.

“That makes sense as to why it’s now all this is happening.” She murmured. “Because it would take a while to really get it moving. But if the people on Kanemitsu still believe that Jurai somehow ordered the deaths of those people — I guess she and the others like her have become martyrs to the extremist cause.”

She sighed, shaking her head slowly.

“We always seem to wind up tangling with the mentally

unbalanced.” She murmured. “It’s so tiresome.”

“But you’ll speak to him anyway?”

“I will.” Washu confirmed. “I’ll be in touch with you too, Kiyone. Thank you for filling me in on things your end. I have a better picture now. It seems that number one priority is to get those defences fixed before Akihiro-san can finish whatever little toy he happens to be building. And finding some way to quash the paranoia that’s growing on the Earth, too — because attack or no attack, it’s getting to the point where people like Ryoko can’t even walk down the street without trouble. And if she’s not the one causing it, I don’t think that’s fair.”

“Me either. Tell her she has my sympathies and I’m doing my best.” Kiyone said frankly. “This is Yagami, over and out.”

The screen flashed to black, and Washu frowned, reaching over to switch off the communications link.

“Well, well.” She murmured, getting to her feet. “I’m almost glad to know Kiyone’s on the case, even if it is dangerous. I hope she’s learnt something from the last time, that’s all. And Seiryō’s mother... the timing couldn’t be worse. Unless Nakabito’s taking advantage of Seiryō’s seeming lack of attention to detail at present. I suppose he might be. Whatever the truth, though, I suppose I really do need to hurry along the fixing of those defences. Which means I’ve got to debrief Yume, go to Tokyo and make contact with Nakabito, all before anything major happens.”

She sighed, letting her breath out in a rush.

“Well, noone ever said being a genius scientist was easy!”

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

It was dark by the time Tenchi returned to the mountains, and as he made his way up the front drive leading up to the house his father had designed and built so many years ago, he scanned the skyline for any sign of his enigmatic, unpredictable fiancée. For the previous couple of nights, she had chosen to spend the evening outside under the stars, as if homesick for the speeding runs she and Ryo Ohki had once made between galaxies in their days as pirates on the run. But tonight she was nowhere to be seen and Tenchi frowned, noting that the moon was barely visible through the clouds that had gathered overhead.

“I wonder where she is.” He reflected absently, as he rummaged in his pocket for his key. “Or if she’s even here. Maybe she and Ryo Ohki have gone up into space — I wouldn’t blame her. She’s overreacting about coming to Osaka, but she does need to let off steam. It’s a pity she didn’t come into the city with me today. I could have tried to make peace between her and Kane and then things would have been smoother for everyone. Never mind... maybe the next time.”

He unlocked the door, stepping into the hall as he removed his shoes, slipping his jacket off and folding it over his arm.

“I’m home!” He called. “Anyone about?”

“Tenchi!” At the sound of his voice, Yume emerged from the kitchen, an apron tied around her body and a smile on her features. “You were late back — I was starting to worry about you.”

“Yume.” Tenchi hesitated for a moment, eying her carefully, and Yume frowned, tilting her head on one side as she interpreted his expression.

“Tenchi-kun?”

“Nothing.” Tenchi shook his head. “Noone else home?”

“Washu’s in the lab, but I think she’s going out of town early tomorrow, so don’t disturb her.” Yume said with a shrug. “She has to go see someone about something at the Space Consortium — you know what they’re like. They can’t do a thing without her holding their hand these days. I said I’d go, if she wanted me to — but she

thinks she ought to do it herself, so she is. Your father's not got back from the office yet — he called to say he'd missed his train and he was going to spend the night in the city, because it was just too much trouble to try and get another at this hour. Your grandfather's at the shrine still, I imagine. I was just cleaning up after dinner — but I think there's some left, if you're hungry."

"No, I ate out." Tenchi shook his head. "Ryoko?"

"She and Ryo Ohki went out a little while ago." Yume replied. "I don't know where they went, but I can't detect Ryo Ohki's signal around the shrine. I imagine they went upwards — Ryoko's been tense, and I think Ryo Ohki wanted to help her let off some of that stress. They've probably gone to the moon or something — I guess they'll be back soon enough."

"Okay. I wondered about that." Tenchi acknowledged. "What about you? You're just... cooking?"

"And cleaning up." Yume eyed him quizzically. "Why?"

Tenchi frowned, eying her searchingly, and the droid met his gaze impassively.

"Why are you staring at me?" She whispered. "What's on your mind?"

Tenchi's eyes narrowed, and he frowned.

"You were in Osaka this afternoon." He said softly, and Yume's eyes opened wide with surprise.

"Huh?"

"You were in Osaka." Tenchi pursed his lips, as for a brief instant he thought he caught sight of a glimmer of uncertainty in her lilac gaze. "Yes, you were. I can see it in your expression — you know what I'm talking about. What's going on, Yume? Why were you there?"

"I don't know what you mean." Yume said frankly, turning back towards the kitchen. "But I have washing up to do, so if you'll excuse me."

"Nope, not that easily." Tenchi shook his head, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Come on, Yume — why are you being weird with me?"

"Why are *you* being weird with *me*?" Yume countered. "I'm trying to do my job here, and you're interfering, Tenchi — at this rate it'll take me all night."

"So I'll help." Tenchi said firmly, propelling her into the kitchen

and grabbing the dishcloth from the drainer. "You wash, I'll dry. And you talk, while I listen!"

"You're talking nonsense." Yume said crossly, nonetheless reaching across to fill the sink with water. "Maybe the stress of planning a wedding is getting to you as well."

"Maybe not." Tenchi shook his head. "Look, I don't understand this. You're not usually like this — what's wrong with you tonight?"

"Nothing." Yume looked surprised. "What would be?"

"All right. Let me take a different tack." Tenchi sighed. "This afternoon, Ikeda and I met up with Kyoda and his friend Ishida in the park in Osaka. We went to see a movie and then we grabbed something to eat in one of the burger bars in town. It was a lot of fun."

"Okay..." Yume said slowly. "That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes, except that I spent most of the film wondering whether I was losing my mind." Tenchi said frankly. "And whether or not the girl called Manami was or wasn't the girl I know as Yume. Because I know you've adopted that name before, Yume-chan. And that girl looked... a lot like Manami Kurashida this afternoon."

"Funny how those things happen, isn't it?" Yume reflected absently, holding out the bowl she had just washed. "Here. You said you were drying."

"Right." Tenchi took the bowl, obediently rubbing it with the cloth. "And yeah, it really is funny. I don't know that I believe in that much coincidence."

"You're being strange now." Yume scolded him. "You think I was in Osaka? With you and your friends?"

"Yes. I do." Tenchi nodded. "I'm pretty sure of it."

"Why would I be?" Yume arched an eyebrow. "I've never met Kenichi Ishida or Kane Kyoda, and I've not really any interest in doing so."

"Hah!" Tenchi dumped the bowl down on the unit, pointing at her triumphantly, and Yume stared at him, disconcerted by this uncharacteristic outburst.

"Tenchi?"

"You said you don't know them!"

“Yes. So?”

“So how do you know that Ishida’s first name is Kenichi?!”

Yume stared at him for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders.

“I do listen when you talk about your friends. I’m not deaf.” She replied evenly. Tenchi shook his head.

“No, because Ishida is Kyoda’s friend. He’s not mine.” He said frankly. “I’ve met him a few times, but by the time you came to live here, Kyoda and I had fallen out. And I certainly haven’t seen him in that time. I wouldn’t have mentioned him to you at all — I didn’t expect to see him today. So you can quit with the act, Yume. You’re rattled. You were in Osaka, and I want to know why. And why you’re lying to me. I don’t like it — tell me what’s going on.”

Yume gazed at him, biting her lip. Then she sighed.

“Damn.” She murmured. “I guess my circuits are more tired than I thought.”

Tenchi set down the cloth, folding his arms across his chest.

“Well, I’m listening.” He said softly. “Why were you there?”

“Because Washu and I asked her to be, Tenchi.”

A voice from the hallway startled them both, and Tenchi turned, seeing his fiancée in the doorway, Ryo Ohki perched on her shoulder. At the expression on her face, Tenchi frowned, taking a step or two towards her, and then faltering.

“Ryoko?” He murmured. “You... knew about this too?”

“Yes.” Ryoko said briefly, casting Yume a dark look. “Only someone here really needs to learn to keep their mouth shut a little more.”

“I’m tired.” Yume defended herself, as Ryo Ohki leapt down from her mistress’s shoulders, winding herself around the droid’s ankles with a purr. “It isn’t easy playing pretend for so long, you know — it’s an art and my circuits get tired just as your brain does!”

“Wait a minute.” Tenchi held up his hands. “Are you telling me... that you are... spying on Kenichi Ishida?”

“Sort of.” Yume agreed reluctantly. “I mean, well... yes, I suppose I am.”

“And you *asked* her to do this?” Tenchi cast Ryoko a startled look. “Why in hell would you? What is Kenichi Ishida to you?”

“Kane Kyoda’s friend.” Ryoko said simply, and Tenchi’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“So what you’re actually doing is spying on *Kane*?” He demanded. Ryoko nodded.

“Of course, you idiot. What else would we be doing?” She asked. “Yes. Mr “I’ll be friends with you all of a sudden’. I told you before — I don’t like how convenient it is. And I don’t trust him.”

So you sent Yume to spy on him... “Tenchi trailed off, shaking his head in disbelief.” Ryoko...

“He did it first!” Ryoko objected.

“He did what first?”

“The spying!” Ryoko grimaced. “You don’t think he actually *wants* to be friends, do you? Are you that much of a dope, Tenchi? You must have realised it by now. He’s spending time with you because he wants to get information on *me*!”

“Ryoko!” Frustration welled up inside Tenchi’s heart at this and he shook his head, grabbing his fiancée by the shoulders and giving her a gentle shake. “Stop this! We’ve had conversations like this before — not everyone in the world is out to get you!”

“Perhaps not. But Kyoda is.” Ryoko said darkly. “And yes, we’ve had these chats before.”

She flung an arm in Yume’s direction.

“Who was right, Tenchi, when *she* snuck into our lives like little miss innocent? Sometimes a little paranoia goes a long way!”

“But Yume’s part of the family!”

“*Now* she is.” Ryoko shook her head impatiently. “But she hasn’t always been. Don’t you get it, you lamebrain? People aren’t always as nice and simple and honest as you are! And Kane Kyoda is wrapped up in some sinister anti-alien plot which involves using *you* as bait. Don’t you understand that if you keep spending so much time with him, you’re going to wind up giving yourself away, too? And dammit, the Earth is nuts already. It’s getting worse... are you completely blind to that fact?”

“I’m not blind to anything!” Tenchi objected, and Ryoko shook her head impatiently.

“Yes you are. You *always* are.” She said sadly, and Tenchi was struck by the tears that glittered in the amber eyes. “You always have

been, since we met. You were blind to Ayeka being in love with you. You were blind to Yume's infiltration of our home as a spy. And now you're doing it again. You're being stupid, and I can't even trust you to spend time with your own friends in case one of them is a spy because your damn judgement is shot to hell!"

"Ryoko!"

"What?" Ryoko demanded. "Tell me something that I've said that's not true!"

"You have no idea about Kane and his intentions! And you don't even *know* Kenichi Ishida!" Tenchi exclaimed. "You can't just send Yume to spy on people you don't like — don't you trust my judgement at all? I thought we'd got past this — I thought you were the one who told me to live and let live, this time around. I thought you'd be glad that Kyoda and I have buried the hatchet and we aren't fighting any more. Why the hell aren't you?"

"Because he and his nasty little friends are trying to get me framed as some kind of psycho criminal!" Ryoko snapped back. "If he was just your friend, Tenchi, I'd be fine with it. But he isn't, dammit. He *isn't*! He's taking everything you say and reporting it to Ishida's bigshot father, who's conspiring with people who don't seem to like me or my being on the Earth a whole lot. Open your eyes, dammit! Just because everything seems all right in the world for you — stop and think for a moment that it might not always be exactly what it seems to be!"

At this, Tenchi stopped dead, staring at her in disbelief.

"Ryoko..."

"No... don't." Ryoko shook her head. "I don't want to hear any more about what kind of friend Kane is or isn't, or how you stopped hanging out originally because of my coming to the Earth. I don't need to hear it again."

"That's not what I was going to say at all — don't put words into my mouth!"

"Well, they're no worse than the ones you're putting there." Ryoko snapped, and for the first time since they had met, Tenchi saw a flicker of something cold and hard in his fiancée's amber eyes. "Because of me, Kyoda's spying on you. Because of me, you and he aren't friends. Because of me, your planet is imploding on itself and turning into an alien battleground. *Because of me*. That's what you want to say, but you never do. So I'm saying it *for* you. Because of me, your life's all messed up and out of sync. Because of me, you wind up

fighting alien forces and killing demons. Because of me, your world has been turned upside-down. Right?"

"Ryoko, *stop* it! *Stop saying stupid things!*"

"All right. I'll stop saying them." Ryoko nodded, a bitter note in her tones. "I'll stop saying anything. If you won't listen to me, Tenchi, there's nothing to say. If you're so sure that everything is great and that you and Kyoda are buddies again, there's no point me trying to tell you otherwise. But if you want a topic of conversation next time you see him, ask him what Kenichi Ishida is doing collaborating with bent officers of the Galaxy Police, and how the hell Haki's name seems to have become common public knowledge all of a sudden!"

With that she disappeared, and for a moment, silence hung over the kitchen as Tenchi stared at the space where his fiancée had just been.

"What the hell was that all about?" He demanded, trying to ignore the lurch of his heart in his chest as he remembered the look in Ryoko's eyes. "Yume, dammit, tell me! What the hell is going on?"

"Ryoko's right." Yume said quietly, placing the last of the dinner plates on the drainer and shooting him a reproachful look. "You are stupid."

"Yume!"

"Well, you are." Yume said frankly. "And I never thought I'd take Ryoko's side against you, Tenchi, but this time I do. I am. Because you haven't a clue... you really have no idea what it means to be an alien on the Earth."

With that she swept out of the room, and with a chastising mew, Ryo Ohki trotted after her, leaving the young prince alone in the kitchen.

For a moment he just stood there. Then he frowned, shaking his head.

"I don't understand what just happened." He murmured. "But Ryoko was upset. And I... I need to find her. And sort out... whatever it is that's buzzing in her brain. But first... first I want to know exactly what the heck's been going on behind my back. And for that, I think I'm going to go to the top... if anyone's in charge of something like this, it's Washu."

"Astute observation, Tenchi-kun."

At the sound of the voice, he made to turn, but before he could, fingers brushed against his arm and he felt the world around him swirl

and twist as the scientist transported the both of them through space and time to the seclusion of her laboratory.

“There. This is a better place for you, until you come to your senses.”

“Washu?” As they rematerialised in the familiar workspace, Tenchi raised a hand to his head, staring at the scientist in bewilderment. “All right — what have I walked in on this evening? Why is Ryoko throwing a flaming fit at me? Why is Yume spying on my friends? What has Kyoda to do with anything... what’s going on?”

“You really *are* an idiot sometimes.” Washu said frankly. “When you can’t see things that are right in front of you. Believing in people is all very well, Tenchi, and I admire you for it most of the time. But this time...”

She sighed, shaking her head as she sank down in her chair, folding her arms across her chest.

“What did you say to my daughter?” She asked softly. “I heard yelling, and I came to investigate, but I didn’t see her leave.”

“She teleported out. I was going to go look for her.”

“Well, you needn’t bother.” Washu said frankly. “Because she’s not here any more.”

“Huh?”

“She’s not in the house.” Washu shook her head. “Because of everything that’s gone on of late, I gave her a comm chip to carry with her in case she needed to get a hold of me at speed. It has a twenty mile radius, but it’s no longer giving off a signal that I can pick up. So she’s not here in the mountains any more. Which means you’ve really royally upset her this time.”

“Ryoko...” Tenchi frowned. “Washu, explain. Now. Please. I want to know.”

“The quick version or the long one?” Washu asked.

“Both.” Tenchi said frankly. “Start with the quick and then fill me in on the details.”

“Fine.” Washu pursed her lips. “Your friend Kyoda is a spy for someone involved with a man who wants to blow up the Earth. There’s the short version.”

“What...?”

“And the long one... will take some time to explain.” Washu reached across to activate her screen. “It’s a complex plot and it spreads far away from the Earth. This planet’s people are pawns, really. Someone is playing on their paranoia, but Earth is being used as a potential sacrifice by Kanemitsu terrorists in an attempt to get free of Jurai. It seems that they’re going to all this trouble because they think if people believe Jurai breached protection space laws and blew up the Earth, they’d be undermined as a power and planets such as theirs would be able to break away. They don’t care what happens to the people here — but their spokesperson — a man named Nakabito — is encouraging the anti-alien feeling among some influential people on this planet. One of which is Seguru Ishida, a primary investor in Earth’s space defences and... the father of Kenichi, your friend Kane’s bosom buddy.”

A cold chill crept down Tenchi’s spine as he glanced at the images on the screen, staring at Washu in horror.

“But...”

“Ryoko doesn’t seem to be the primary objective, but she’s been used as a convenient figurehead for dissent.” Washu continued remorselessly, ignoring the churning emotions that played themselves out on Tenchi’s face as he listened. “Her past is a pain, and unfortunately the enemy in all of this has access to her records. He’s put it about, what things she’s been involved in, and naturally it’s created a certain amount of fear. Coupled with the Osaka club fire... these things have a habit of getting blown out of proportion when people don’t know the full facts.”

She shrugged.

“You know that someone attacked Ryoko verbally in Osaka when she and Sakura were shopping?” She asked. Wordlessly Tenchi nodded.

“That person was Kenichi Ishida.” Washu said frankly. “And more, he was stunned by Nakabito’s weapon, to make it look like Ryoko attacked him. Even Kenichi probably doesn’t know it was Nakabito who attacked him. But because I was already suspicious of his father, I had Yume following Kenichi. And fortunately she saw Nakabito, which enabled me to identify who we were up against. It’s also thanks to Yume’s intervention that your fiancée escaped the incident unscathed. There was, I understand, a rather nasty mob scene developing and she and Sakura might both have been hurt. Or Ryoko would have been forced to use her powers — further widening the rift between her and the general population of Japan.”

Tenchi swallowed hard.

“Washu...”

“Nakabito is a Galaxy Police Elite agent with a grudge against Jurai... both personal and political, it seems.” Washu continued as if he had not spoken. “He has connections and resources that mean the Earth is seriously under threat. And that’s why Yume has been spying the way she has.”

“But why wasn’t I *told* about any of this?”

“That was my call. Not Ryoko’s or Yume’s.” Washu said evenly.

“But why?”

“Because you’re stupid sometimes.” Washu admitted. “But most significantly, it was because it was easier that you didn’t know, because then you couldn’t give anything away. It’s been the best way to protect you, Tenchi — and that’s been all of our overriding objectives. Ryoko’s in particular. She doesn’t want it to get to the point when they know who you really are, and start to marginalise you too. She’s already feeling that she might have to leave the Earth if this continues and she really doesn’t want that. She feels that if you suffer because of this — Kane’s betrayal, all of this — it’s her fault because they hate her. And it’s not her fault — their hate is irrational and unfounded. But she loves you more than anything. So she’d do anything she could to protect you.”

“And then I yelled at her.” Tenchi’s heart clenched in his throat. Washu nodded.

“And then you yelled at her.” She agreed. “Like I said, you’re stupid sometimes.”

She sighed, flicking the screen off.

“So now you know, for better or worse, what the real picture is.” She added. “I want to protect this planet. We all do. But more than that, I want to see you and Ryoko settle down and have the future I couldn’t have. You know that. However...”

“She was really mad at me.” Tenchi murmured. “I never saw her look at me like that before. And now... where is she? Where has she *gone*, dammit? Ryo Ohki’s still here — where is there she could go?”

“Somewhere to cool down and think, I imagine.” Washu shrugged. “And you should let her. At least for tonight.”

“But Washu!”

“It’s your own stupid fault.” Washu said briskly. “If you will open your big mouth and say stupid things.”

“I didn’t know what was going on!”

“No, but you could have a little trust in the woman you’re going to marry.” Washu said bluntly, and Tenchi stared at her, dismay flooding his expression.

“I do!”

“Do you?” Washu raised an eyebrow. “If you do, why has she disappeared into the blue? I think you underestimate her feelings sometimes, Tenchi. Or how much she’s been hurt in the past. This isn’t her first experience of rejection — she’s made a lifetime of it. The Earth was a place she thought she’d found sanctuary. But now it’s turning out like everywhere else — no matter what she does, she can’t escape who she is or what she’s done. And that’s why she’s been so on edge of late. I imagine she’s beginning to wonder whether or not it’s a good idea, her marrying you and staying here. Whether in the long run, it will hurt you.”

“But... you think she might... leave?”

“I think she already has.” Washu spread her hands. “Whether it’s temporary or not, I suppose we’ll find out. I imagine she won’t abandon Ryo Ohki, so if you want to know where she is, I’d start stocking up on carrots. The little one is probably the only one who knows Ryoko’s mind right now — or her whereabouts. Let her cool off for tonight, like I said. But really, Tenchi, use your brain a little, will you? Ryoko might be coarse and impulsive and reckless sometimes. But when she has a hunch about something or someone, it’s generally on the mark. She’s half Kii, after all — or had you forgotten that she’s my daughter?”

“No... I hadn’t forgotten.” Tenchi sighed, rubbing his temples. “All right. All right, I get it. I screwed up, Ryoko’s upset and I need to fix it. Somehow. But... the Earth... can you stop it? Whatever this guy is planning?”

“Don’t know, yet. But there are a lot of people trying.” Washu said succinctly. “Tenchi, go to bed. Sleep. Tomorrow I’m going to Tokyo to doublecheck on the defences and then I’m going to Galaxy Police Headquarters to meet with Kiyone. She’s investigating this from that end — and I hope that I’ll have more information by the time I come back. You focus on Ryoko — and on fixing your relationship. If she’s really hurt, you might have a job convincing Ryo Ohki to tell you where she is — so I’d start focusing on that and leave the Earth to me

for the time being.”

Tenchi bit his lip, tasting blood on his tongue as slowly he nodded his head.

“Okay.” He murmured, as a hollow feeling spread through his entire body. “I... I’ll do as you say. And I... I’ll try and work out how to talk to her. Because... out of everything I have, Washu... I don’t want to lose Ryoko.”

“I know that.” Washu’s harsh expression softened at this, and she smiled, holding out a hand to pull him to his feet. “But you’re dense sometimes, and you’re still so young. Maybe when Ryoko calms down, she’ll realise that. After all, she loves you too — no matter how upset she is. Consider this a test for your relationship — if you’re really cut out to spend the rest of your lives together, you’ll come through this, even if it is with a few new bruises. It’s a lesson in love, when it comes down to it.”

She winked.

“Learn it.”

“...And today saw a second day of peaceful — if vehement — protests in the centre of Kyoto, as more and more people express concerns about the Intergalactic Alliance. Many leaders in various sectors of the community are calling for stringent investigation into the purpose of any alien seeking to enter the Earth’s atmosphere, with some asking serious questions of the connection to the planet known as Jurai.”

Sakura sighed, reaching to flick off the television as she tut-tutted under her breath, getting languidly to her feet and tying her dressing gown more tightly around her waist as she padded into the kitchen to pour herself a glass of milk.

“People are being crazy. Ryoko wasn’t kidding.” She murmured. “It’s just nuts. Yes, there was the fire in Osaka, but haven’t people born on this planet done far worse things to each other than anyone from outside it ever has? Talk about blowing everything out of proportion!”

As she returned to the lounge, a knock at the door made her jump, almost spilling the drink all over her nightclothes and she cursed, setting it down hurriedly on the wooden table as she wondered who could be calling on her so late at night. As she made her way into the hallway, there was a second knock, and she frowned, her brows knitting together in confusion.

“I’m coming.” She called. “It’s late — have a little patience, huh?”

She reached the door at that moment, slipping back the latch and pulling it open, but any words of annoyance she might have had died on her lips as she registered the look on her visitor’s face.

“*Ryoko?*” She murmured, then, “What the hell’s the matter — you look like you’re about to cry!”

“Can I come in before I do?” Ryoko asked quietly. “I’m sorry for jumping you like this — but... I didn’t know where else to go, really.”

“Sure.” Sakura gathered her wits, nodding as she stood back to let her friend enter. She fastened the door firmly, sending her a curious look. “Though why are you here? Did something happen — like what happened the other day?”

Ryoko shook her head.

“No.” She murmured. “Not like that.”

“Then what?” Sakura frowned. “Come and sit down, by the way — it’s still a bit chaotic in here, but there are chairs. My brother-in-law and my sister were here early this morning helping me straighten things up somewhat, so it’s at least liveable — grab a pew, huh?”

“Sure.” Ryoko nodded, doing as she was bidden, and sinking down onto the end of the sofa with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you have anything stronger to drink than milk, Sakura? If you do, I could use it.”

“Woah girl.” Sakura held up her hands, shaking her head. “There’s no liquor in the flat — and besides, you don’t look like someone who should be binge drinking tonight. You look upset — and alcohol will only make that worse. Talk to me instead, okay? Something’s obviously happened, so you might as well tell me what.”

Ryoko glanced down at her hands, and for a moment there was silence between them. Then Sakura’s eyes opened wide with sudden comprehension.

“You and Tenchi had a fight, didn’t you?” She murmured, and Ryoko raised tragic gold eyes to meet her dark ones. Slowly she nodded.

“It must have been a big deal, if you came all the way out here.”

“It... was.” Ryoko sighed again, closing her eyes briefly as she leant back against the soft support of the chair. “Technically I suppose I did most of the fighting. Well, the yelling. But I was angry, Kura. I’m still

angry. I just... I didn't want to be in the mountains and I didn't know who else I could call on. You're pretty much the only other friend I have like this — so I'm sorry I've put you in the middle. I wasn't sure what else to do."

"You can stay here tonight if you want to." Sakura assured her. "That's no problem, really."

She eyed her friend curiously.

"Do you want to tell me what the fight was about?" She asked softly.

"Tenchi found out about Yume spying on Kenichi Ishida and Kane Kyoda." Ryoko said simply. "He seems to think Kyoda is all sweetness and light... ah, it drives me crazy, Sakura. Really. I don't think it's that I'm jealous — I mean, I don't care if Tenchi has other friends. But Kyoda's not on the level. You know better than he does that something's up, right? Do you think it's unreasonable for us to want to know what's going on?"

"No, I don't, but if Tenchi's been kept in the dark, I guess he was upset." Sakura frowned. "Is that what happened? He got angry because you'd kept it a secret?"

"I think he thinks I'm being paranoid. No, scratch that." Ryoko groaned. "He *does* think I'm being paranoid. He even called me on it. We've argued about that before — about how he wants to believe in everyone he meets and how I'm suspicious of people until I know them better. But usually my technique has a better survival rate. I mean, dammit, he's got no clue about these things. And we only kept him out of it because he's at risk of exposing himself, too. Can you imagine what these nutjobs will do, Kura, if they find out Tenchi's Juraian?"

"Tenchi isn't Juraian. Tenchi's from the Earth." Sakura said matter-of-factly. "What his Grandfather's heritage is isn't important. He's an Earthling just like Ikeda and I are."

"Do you think that those fanatics are going to see it the same way?"

"I suppose not." Sakura sighed. "There was a demonstration in Kyoto today, by the way. An anti-alien rally, or some such thing. It wasn't a violent riot or anything like that. But the mood is shifting — you're right about that. And from what you and Washu-san both were saying the other day, it's clearly the work of that Naka... whatever his name was guy. It's not coincidence. Maybe it's time you told Tenchi everything. Maybe then he'd understand."

“Right now I’m not speaking to him.” Ryoko said flatly, and Sakura stared at her in surprise.

“Ryoko?”

“I’m too angry.” Ryoko ran her fingers through her thick hair. “I might blow something up that I’ll regret. Possibly Tenchi himself. I’m sick of feeling this way, Sakura. It doesn’t feel like me... to be constantly on edge and worried about what other people think of me. And I only feel that way because I’m trying my best to fit into Tenchi’s life and not be a bother to him.”

“It’s not his fault these things are happening, Ryoko.”

“I know that.” Ryoko snapped, then she sighed. “Sorry. I’m not going to bite your head off too. It’s just... I love him, that’s all. I really do, Kura. More than anything. And yet... by being here... because I’m on the Earth, Kane Kyoda and his nasty little spy ring are targeting Tenchi and taking advantage of his good nature to find out things about me. And it’s not just me. Washu’s pretty sure that it’s bigger than that. So basically, my being here isn’t just putting Tenchi in trouble, it might even be putting the Earth in danger. If they found out that Tenchi had Juraian heritage, they’d probably mass on him and kill him. It’s bad enough that they think I’m Juraian — only they’re scared of me, I think, because they know I can blow stuff up and dammit, the way I feel right now, I’d quite happily oblige them.”

“No blowing up in my apartment.” Sakura said firmly. “That’s a house rule. You can stay here as long as you need to to cool down, Ryoko — or figure out what you want to do. But you’re not to explode anything while you’re here. Is that understood? I don’t want to be explaining to my new landlord why there’s a hole in my bathroom wall all of a sudden.”

Despite herself, Ryoko offered a faint, rueful smile at this, nodding her head.

“All right. I promise.” She said softly. “Although my being here might cause you trouble too, you know.”

She sighed, resting her chin in her hands.

“In some ways I overreacted.” She admitted heavily. “I yelled a lot of things at Tenchi, which I accused him of thinking or feeling... and you know, I don’t think he’s ever said them to me. But it doesn’t change the fact they’re true. And I’m angry at him for being such a well-meaning dope... but I’m also angry at the idiots who are using him. And most of all... most of all, Kura, I’m mad at me.”

“At you?” Sakura settled herself in her seat, casting her a quizzical glance. “Why so?”

“Because I’m a space pirate.” Ryoko whispered. “I’ve never regretted any of it, that’s the truth. It was fun. A blast. I loved it. But... but if I hadn’t been... if I hadn’t have done all those things, they wouldn’t be able to use me as such a focal point for their hysteria. Would they? My police records speak for themselves. I’m a space thief. A vandal. I blew up things, stole things, and caused chaos for years. If that was all you knew about someone, would you trust them, Sakura? I sure as hell wouldn’t. So I’m angry most of all at myself because, dammit, I understand why they hate me and I hate that I do. I hate that I did that stuff at all! I wish I’d known I was going to meet Tenchi and that I was going to love him as much as this! If I’d known it — if I’d have had some idea that something good was going to happen to me like that, I’m sure I’d have not messed up so much as I have. But it’s too late to take it back, isn’t it?”

At that, her tears began to fall, and Sakura sighed, coming to perch on the edge of the chair as she put an arm around the other girl’s shoulders.

“You’re not a pirate any more. I know that. So does Tenchi.” She said quietly. “What’s past is past. You’re right — it can’t be changed. But it doesn’t mean you’re beyond redemption, Ryoko. Listen. You’ve done nothing to harm the Earth since you’ve been here. You love Tenchi. He loves you. And it’s no business of everyone else.”

“If I’d not revealed myself to them, though, in the nightclub...”

“Then people would have died and it would have been your fault for being a coward.” Sakura said bluntly. “You’re *not* a coward. You did the right thing because you had to, not because it was the easiest option. You saved a lot of people at your own personal expense. And you didn’t cause that situation. Seiryō Tennan did. And you know what? It wasn’t even your fault he came. He was looking for *Tenchi*, Ryoko. Not you. Tenchi is tied up in the alien thing with or without your involvement in his life. He’s a target because of it — right? You shouldn’t beat yourself up over it.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I should leave the Earth completely.” Ryoko rubbed her temples. “I don’t think I could be here without Tenchi, but I don’t know if I could be anywhere, now. I can’t really see past it. But I’ve been hated on planets before. And I don’t like it. I have feelings too, even if I am an alien. And I just want to belong here, and be Mrs Tenchi Masaki and have folk accept me for that. Why is that wrong?”

"It's not wrong. Stop being an idiot and *listen* to me!" Sakura said firmly. "Listen to me. People who are discriminated against... they often think it's their fault for being different. But it's not that way at all. If noone was different, nothing would ever change. Nothing would ever be interesting... everything would be exactly the same, day in and day out. You're different. So what? It's nothing to be ashamed of. And I really want you to snap out of this mood, Ryoko. You're actually starting to scare me a little — you sound so completely unlike the girl I've come to know."

"I'm sorry." Ryoko raised her gaze. "I guess I don't feel like I'm much of anything tonight."

"Maybe you should call him. At least let him know you're safe. Or I will." Sakura suggested. "If you don't want to do it yourself."

"No... it's late... leave it." Ryoko shook her head. "I don't want him descending on this place in the middle of the night. And even worse, I don't want to be wondering if he will come or if he won't... if you called him. I don't want to think about Tenchi for a while. It's too confusing. I need some space."

"Maybe *Tenchi* being a target has actually put pressure on *you*, not the other way around?" Sakura suggested lightly.

"Huh?" Ryoko looked startled.

"Seiryō Tennan came to the Earth looking for Tenchi. That began all of this. The hysteria, the panic, the alien awareness. Everything." Sakura shrugged. "It also forced you to reveal yourself. If you ask me, it's not you that's the one causing the problem. It's the fact Tenchi is who he is."

"I'm trying to prevent people from finding that out."

"And maybe that's why you're so on edge, Ryoko." Sakura said gently. "Because you're so hot on protecting *him*."

"You think so?" Ryoko looked surprised. Sakura nodded.

"Look at it this way." She said sensibly. "You're an easy target for paranoid Earth mania because your past is so well known in space circles. And I think Kane probably targeted you because you came between him and Tenchi and he's the kind of guy who doesn't forgive things like that so easily. He probably doesn't even realise what he's doing, because he's a moron at the end of the day. But the fact of the matter is, noone would probably have paid you the slightest bit of notice if Tenchi hadn't been a descendant of the planet Jurai and if Seiryō Tennan hadn't come to this planet looking for him. So stop

blaming yourself. If you don't blame Tenchi, then it's ridiculous for you to carry the guilt... isn't it?"

"Maybe I should be blaming Seiryō Tennan." Ryoko said darkly, flickers of amber energy crackling around the edges of her fingers as she spoke and Sakura shrugged.

"I'm trying to stop you blaming anyone. I'm trying to get you to calm down." She said evenly. "And if you do that with your fingers again, you can sleep in the hallway. I told you already — no explosions."

Ryoko lowered her hands, looking rueful.

"Okay. I get it. Sorry." She acknowledged. "I guess I'm too angry to be completely rational right now."

"I'd noticed." Sakura offered her a grin. "Look, are you hungry? I know it's late — I was just going to head to bed when you came in. But I don't start my new job till Monday, and it won't hurt for me to be late to sleep for once. I can heat something and we can watch a movie — take your mind off things a little. If you like."

"I... I guess that would be nice." Ryoko returned the grin with a feeble smile of her own. "Okay. Thanks, 'Kura. I owe you one big time."

"Not really." Sakura grinned. "It's what friends are for, you know — and besides, you shouldn't worry about whether or not you belong here quite so much. It's a moot point — aside from the fireworks, you're acting just like any Earth girl would act right now if they'd had a blazing row with their fiancé. You're more normal than you give yourself credit for — so don't fret about it. I'm sure in the morning you'll feel better and everything will be calmer. Okay?"

"Okay." She agreed. "I hope you're right. Right now I feel pretty wrecked inside... maybe it won't hurt to have a night away from home."

"A sleepover is always fun." Sakura assured her, getting to her feet. "I'll go see what I've got in the cupboard — you choose a film, all right? I've not unpacked everything yet but there's a box of my better ones under the table, if you want to have a glance through."

"I'll do that." Ryoko agreed, drying her eyes as she nodded her head. "I'm glad that coming to the Earth meant I met you anyway. It's nice to know there's someone's shoulder to cry on if I screw up big-time."

“Yeah, you can rely on me for that.” Sakura laughed. “All right. You get hunting — snacks are coming right up!”

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

Well, so it was now or never.

Kiyone bit her lip, gazing up at the door of Nakabito's office as she struggled to quell the urge to turn tail and run away. A quick sweep of the docking bay had assured her that the agent's craft was not in situ, and from the message she had received from Washu earlier that morning, she knew that he had likely gone out to meet her, somewhere in the depths of space.

"Although if that's true, I wonder if he doesn't feel safe bringing her back here." She wondered, fumbling in her pocket for Imaguchi's skeleton key and glancing at it. "Which means it's going to be more difficult to arrange a meeting between her and the other agents. Though I should let Washu worry about that and focus on what I'm doing here. I need to concentrate — breaking into Elite offices is never a wise idea, even if you have the backing of other Elite to do it. I'm still not sure why I'm doing their dirty work for them — but I suppose I am less suspicious a spy than either of them would be."

She glanced at the key, then shrugged, sweeping it through the security lock panel as she waited for the alarms in the entire sector to start ringing to announce her presence. There was nothing, however, just a glimmer of red across the keypad and then the sound of the door click loose, emitting a soft hiss as it slid back on its runners to reveal the office within.

For a moment Kiyone stared at it, as if not quite believing it had been that easy. Then she gathered her wits, pocketing the card as she took a tentative step into the office. As she did so, she found herself scanning the room for any security cameras, but as she reached the desk, she realised that Imaguchi had been right to have faith in his late friend's technology. On Nakabito's computer screen, an error message had flashed up, and as she squinted at it, Kiyone felt relief flicker through her senses.

"Security lock failed. All systems down." She murmured. *"Enter password to reinstate."* Well, I don't want to do that just yet, thank you. It suits me just fine that your systems are down."

She sank down into Nakabito's seat, pulling the data drive from her

pocket and carefully attaching it to the computer's hardware as she flicked the switch to 'on'. Immediately a '*password protected*' box flashed up on the screen and she bit her lip, muttering a curse as she realised that no agent of Nakabito's calibre would leave his machine undefended.

"But what would a guy like that put as a password?" She murmured. "Kanemitsu? Something political? Something..."

She faltered, then typed,

"KANEMITSU"

A red box flickered up on the monitor and she sighed, shaking her head.

"Rejected." She murmured. "All right. How about... how about" Sumire?"

She typed it in, but again she got the same red rejection box. She chewed down on her lip, contemplating.

"What other things might he think of? Something that noone else would logically guess he'd use?" She murmured. "What would he think was secure enough — memorable enough... what kind of password would a man like Nakabito have?"

She sat there for a moment, running her mind through various possibilities and discarding each as she grimaced in frustration, shaking her head.

"No good. I don't know him well enough." She muttered. "Now if it was Seiryō, I might..."

She trailed off, her eyes opening wide with realisation.

"Seiryō." She murmured. "I don't suppose... he's not so much of a masochist that he'd use the name of his arch-enemy to lock his files?"

She paused, then keyed in

"SEIRYO TENNAN"

Again the red box flashed on the screen, and Kiyone let out a sigh of impatience, resisting the urge to bang her fists down on the desk.

"What am I meant to do? I can't duplicate what I can't access!" She muttered. "If it's not Kanemitsu, it's not Seiryō, it... it..."

Her eyes narrowed.

"The girl." She whispered. "The girl... the one that Seiryō stole

from him. What did Imaguchi say her name was? Dammit, I'm sure someone told me. I bet that's his passcode — the girl he loved, and lost. He's still holding a grudge over it, after all — is it too much of a leap to think he still loves her?"

She bit her lip.

"Yu... something beginning with Y." She remembered. "Yumi? Yuri? *Yuriko!*"

Resisting the impulse to shout the name out loud, she carefully typed it into the box, a flare of triumph entering her sapphire eyes as a green '*access granted*' message flashed up before her.

"Bingo." She murmured. "Never underestimate the passion of a jilted lover. *Yuriko* it is, and we're in. But what am I looking for? Shall I just scan through his drives and see what I can find?"

She glanced up at the clock on the wall, gauging how long she could risk staying in the office.

"A half hour, Imaguchi said." She recalled. "But I want to be gone long before that. I better get cracking."

She flicked open the computer's memory, and for a moment there was nothing in the office but the sound of the occasional click as she accessed file after file, downloading some onto her data disk but discovering, much to her disappointment, that most of them were old case reports and that there was nothing incriminating stored on Nakabito's computer.

She frowned, pushing the chair back from the desk as she debated what to do.

"Are Imaguchi and Takamura wrong about this, then?" She wondered. "Or is he just better at hiding it than that? I guess the latter is possible, considering his line of work. I suppose he must be aware of potential hacking, whether by his colleagues or the people he investigates. So he must have something else that he uses to keep any data relating to this business on. There's no reference to either me or Seiryō on here either, although when he spoke to me he had transcribed evidence from the Juraian hearing. So there has to be another archive somewhere. And I'm not seeing it. A data disk, perhaps? Something small and simple that can be more easily concealed?"

She got to her feet, crossing the office to the filing cabinet that stood on the far wall. It was locked, but she had not spent years with Mihoshi and her chronic habit of losing keys for nothing, and she slid

her watch from her wrist, using the buckle to carefully jiggle the fastening free. She pulled open the top drawer, finding it full of nothing but claims reports, and with a dissatisfied bang she pushed it shut, turning her attention to the next.

It was similarly filled, this time with expenses receipts and the third drawer contained various bits and pieces of equipment, but nothing that looked even remotely like a secret hidden disk.

She turned back to the desk, pulling open the drawers and rummaging carefully through the files, making sure that she returned everything to its original place as she did so. Everything she touched seemed to be in order, however, and she felt a pang of guilt all of a sudden for digging through the private property of someone who, at least so far, she had been unable to prove a criminal.

And then, as she went to close the top drawer of the desk, her fingers brushed against something else and she frowned, crouching down to peer into the wooden cabinet as she tried to work out what it was. She ran her hand against it again, feeling the cool hardness of metal, and as she spread her fingers across it, her eyes widened.

“A secret drawer?” She whispered. “I wonder...”

As she felt along the edge of it, she found what seemed like some kind of a catch and she pushed it, half expecting nothing to happen. At first, nothing did, but then, with a click, the inner drawer sprung forward and Kiyone’s heart clenched in her chest as she registered what was inside.

“Operation Eradicate.” She murmured, slipping her fingers underneath the disk and pulling it out as she ran her gaze over the neat white label. “So what’s that, then? Something worth hiding, evidently. I wonder.”

She cast another glance at the time, then pulled the disk from its case, slipping it into the drive of the computer and hitting the load button. Immediately she found herself faced with a long list of files, some of which had easily readable filenames but others of which were coded in what looked like unintelligible nonsense to her untrained eye. She frowned, skimming her finger down the list until she found her name, and she opened it, glancing at the contents.

Inside was the transcript of her testimony against Seiryō, and she nodded her head slowly.

“Bingo again.” She murmured. “I might not be able to read half of the stuff on here, but I’m pretty damn sure that this is what Imaguchi

and Takamura wanted me to find. And I can't take the disk, because if I do, he'll know something's up. But I can copy it... can't I? I hope I have time. I've already been here longer than I'd like — if the security lock re-activates itself while I'm still duplicating, I might find myself locked in here. And even if he does see me as an ally, that's going to be hard to explain!"

She hesitated for a moment, then highlighted the files on the disk, accessing the data drive and hitting the 'copy' button.

"Yes, I do want to duplicate the entire contents of the disk." She muttered, as a query box flickered on the screen. "Stop procrastinating and just do it already. I need to be out of here as soon as possible!"

She hit the button again, getting to her feet as she returned the office to some semblance of its normal order.

"I really hope I can do this in time." She reflected. "There's a lot on this disk!"

She sank back down into her seat, drumming her fingers absently on the desk as she willed the process to go faster. As she did so, she found herself wondering about the files with the incomprehensible names, and as she did so, her mind strayed to Seiryō.

"Encrypted?" She murmured. "Could *he* crack them? But that would defeat the object of trying to keep him *out* of this. Surely all Agents have some encryption expertise... after all, Seiryō can do a lot of other things too, can't he? This is just his speciality. Surely Imaguchi or Takamura will be able to interpret what language or code that's written in — at least, I hope they will. I'm not risking my neck here for nothing."

A bleep from the screen told her that the process had finished and she let out a sigh of relief, reaching to unhook her device. As she did so, however, the security window popped up again, and she froze, staring at it in horror.

"Reconnection agent — attempting security reboot in thirty seconds." She read. "Damn. Time to go."

She slipped the device hurriedly into her pocket, darting across the office and out of the door just as she heard the bleep and whirr of the security lock judder back into life. She let out a sigh, leaning against the wall as she gathered her thoughts.

"That was close as I'd have liked. I wish Hirayama-san had built his device with a longer layoff time." She murmured. "Still, I did what I came here to do. And now I have this, maybe we're one step closer to

cracking this case.”

She hurried along the corridor, reaching the central control centre of the annexe just as the doors slid back to reveal Nakabito himself, and for a moment she stared at him, confused by his sudden presence. He cast her a smile as he saw her, and as he crossed the floor towards her, Kiyone realised he wasn't alone.

“Kiyone-chan!” Washu's tones were soft and casual, but from the flicker of preoccupation in the green eyes Kiyone knew her friend was troubled by something. “I hoped we'd have a chance to see you. Nakabito-san has been explaining to me this troublesome situation... Did you come here looking for me?”

Kiyone looked startled, then she smiled, nodding her head.

“When I got your memo, I thought I'd find you both here.” She agreed. “I'm sorry — I meant to be around to make the introductions, but I suppose your schedules and my own work one clashed a bit. With Mihoshi on vacation time I have twice as much work to do.”

“Detective Kuramitsu, correct?” Nakabito sent her a grin. “Ah yes. I knew her father. A fine agent — a good tutor. One of the fairest men I studied under, I have to say. But then you know that, since you're also acquainted with the family.”

“Yes, sir.” Kiyone nodded her head. “Quite well, thanks to my friendship with Mihoshi. And I know that he taught a lot of the Agents here in service. I didn't know you were one of them, though.”

“I was.” Nakabito's eyes twinkled. “Although not to the extent some of my colleagues worked with him. He was an encryption specialist, you may or not know. And I didn't choose to follow that path beyond what we were all taught. But still, I have fond memories of him... he was a very fair and honourable man.”

“I must meet this man sometime, if that's the case.” Washu said carelessly. “He sounds nothing like Mihoshi so far, Nakabito-san.”

“I've not had the pleasure of meeting Mihoshi-san, so I wouldn't know.” Nakabito shrugged. “But this isn't focusing us on our objective. Hakubi-sensei, your coming here has been most prompt and well appreciated. Would you accompany me to my quarters? Kiyone-san, you too, if you are not otherwise engaged.”

“I came here to see the both of you, so no, I'm not.” Kiyone shook her head. “Your office? Yes, sir.”

“If I may...” Washu held up her hands, and Nakabito paused,

casting his companion a questioning look.

“Yes?”

“I’m not all that fond of stuffy, enclosed Galaxy Police offices.” Washu offered him a winning smile. “You may or may not be aware, Nakabito-san, but I’ve had brushes with confined spaces before, in my past. A long time ago now, a corrupt Prince of a certain planet framed me for the destruction of a planet belonging to his mother. And I have some very... unpleasant memories of the years of imprisonment that followed.”

“A Prince of... Jurai?” Nakabito’s brows drew together in consternation, and Washu inclined her head.

“As you say.” She agreed. “Though I’d rather not make such open admissions here where anyone could hear me. I don’t wish to be accused of slighting a powerful empire — it could be misinterpreted in so many ways.”

“Indeed it could.” Nakabito frowned. “And I understand your wishes. However, my spacecraft is unsuitable for carrying out such a confidential conversation, and your own seems limited in its options. I am not sure what the best thing would be to do.”

“There’s always Yagami.” Kiyone caught Washu’s eyes, offering the agent a smile. “Since the... incident that you asked me about happened, Washu increased the security and stability of my spaceship and it... it’s as secure as any of the Elite fleet now. We could go there — with your permission, Agent Nakabito.”

“Yagami.” Nakabito pursed his lips, then nodded. “All right. That suits.”

He cast Washu a sidelong grin.

“I understand you are quite the scientific genius.” He added. “I’m sure I can put my faith in your skills.”

“Quite.” Washu nodded her head. She paused, then held out her hands, grasping Nakabito’s arm in one and Kiyone’s in the other. “And I also know a short cut to Kiyone’s craft. If you’ll just hang on, we’ll be there in two ticks.”

With a jolt Kiyone realised what Washu intended to do, but by that time it was too late and she swallowed hard, feeling her body swirling through space as the Kii teleported into the main drive room of the elderly red spaceship. Despite its unpolished appearance and its occasional temperamental outbursts, there was some truth in Kiyone’s

claim that the ship was as secure as anywhere else in Headquarters, and as they re-materialised, Nakabito cast a glance around them, nodding approvingly at what he saw.

“I doubt I could ask for better aboard my own ship.” He reflected. “Well, this will do quite nicely. Although, Professor, a little more warning would be appreciated the next time you want to teleport me anywhere. I’m not really used to that kind of transportation.”

“Apologies.” Washu said cheerfully, settling herself down in Mihoshi’s empty seat as she swivelled it around. “I guess I’m so used to doing it now I forget not everyone likes the feel of instant travel.”

“I assume that’s a Kii trait.” Nakabito reflected, and Washu nodded.

“It is.” She confirmed. “But I’m the last of my people to exhibit it. There are surviving Kii, Nakabito-san, but they’re not quite like the Kii I remember. Not like the people that I grew up with, anyway.”

“It’s a shame.” Nakabito’s gaze softened. “It sounds like you and your people suffered much at the hands of Jurai, at one time or another over the years.”

“Generations is a better term.” Washu nodded. “Yes, I suppose so. Though Kihaku is no more, so it hardly seems important.”

“On the contrary.” Nakabito shook his head. “That’s why I wanted to speak to you. You’re aware, I think, that I asked Kiyone to contact you because I wanted to discuss with you the behaviour of Seiryō Tennan on the planet you now reside on — the Earth? And also for any information you might have which might help to bring this case to some kind of closure?”

“I was under the impression the Emperor of Jurai had closed it already.” Washu feigned surprise. “Is it reopened again?”

“The Emperor may have, but the Earth is Galaxy Police jurisdiction and a serious breach of space law has been committed.” Nakabito said evenly. “In that light, we have to pursue an investigation of our own. And even a conviction, if at all possible. You are acquainted with Seguru Ishida on the Earth, aren’t you, Washu-sensei? You must know from your own experiences how afraid the people there are of another attack. Perhaps a more serious one than the last.”

“Yes, they do seem afraid.” Washu agreed. “And you think there’s reason for them to be?”

“I do.” Nakabito said gravely. “I’ve uncovered evidence that Jurai are developing a weapon of colossal proportions — something which

hasn't been ratified or screened by the Science Academy, of which you were once a member. I've only managed to get small snippets of information about this weapon, but from my sources I have learnt that it uses a power source strong enough to maim or even destroy a planet in its path."

"I see." Washu's brows knitted together and Kiyone cast her a glance, wondering what the scientist was thinking. "And you hope for my expert opinion on this — on a way to stop it, perhaps?"

"Yes." Nakabito agreed. "Or at least some kind of indication what it is we're dealing with. Jurai haven't colonised any new worlds for a long time, but it seems unlikely that Kihaku's destruction wasn't an act of Juraian aggression, considering the complicity of the man who is now a senior advisor to the Lady Tsunami. In light of that, Washu-sensei — will you refuse my plea?"

"I will be more than happy to look at any information you give me, Nakabito-san." Washu said lightly. "My priority is to keep the Earth safe, because it's become my home. You needn't worry about that... I'm quite willing to give you my opinion on the subject."

"The weapon in question involves top of the line reactors similar to the ones that generate power on resourceless planets such as Yubisu." Nakabito explained. "The preliminary designs seem to suggest it's some kind of laser — though its exact nature is unclear. As you can imagine, this is all top secret... but I know that they're looking at energy emissions strong enough to power all of Yubisu with one thrust. Such a thing must be dangerous. Mustn't it?"

"It must indeed, in the wrong hands." Washu nodded. "Depending on the specifications and the purpose, of course."

"Of course." Nakabito reached into his pocket, pulling out a sheet of paper which he handed across to her. "Here. This is the rough specification I received from my contact. Do you think that a weapon using these kinds of components could pose a serious threat to other planets, if it was to be fully activated?"

Washu glanced at the sheet for a moment, and silence reigned over Yagami as she digested its contents. At length she glanced up, and Kiyone's eyes widened as she caught the dismay in her friend's eyes.

"Yes, it could." Washu spoke slowly, as if even she was surprised by the potential of the weapon. "Without a doubt. A weapon of this nature, wielded against any planet... would probably produce severe damage. If not... if not instantaneous destruction. It bears similarities... to the weapon... which blew Kihaku into smithereens

eighteen months ago. Yes, Nakabito-san. This is a dangerous weapon indeed.”

“But can its effects be prevented?” Nakabito pressed, and Washu frowned. Slowly she shook her head.

“I doubt that any planet bar Jurai itself has defences of a sophisticated enough nature to guard against the attack of such a weapon.” She said heavily. “Not at present, anyway. Of course, if they were aware of the danger, I’m sure that more powerful planetary groups would devise something to at least deflect the beam.”

“But a planet like the Earth?”

“I imagine it would be wiped out.” Washu said simply, and Kiyone could not stifle a gasp of horror at her friend’s words.

Nakabito nodded, taking the paper back and returning it to his pocket.

“Then you see the danger of the game we’re playing.” He said softly. “Jurai’s designs on the Earth are unclear, even to me. But that the attack of Seiryō Tennan was deliberate seems likely. It was not with the permission of the Galaxy Police, and he has not been punished for it by Jurai. On the contrary, he has been rewarded by power and influence alongside their Goddess and the Emperor himself. I can only imagine they are gearing up to subjugate or kill another species for some nefarious whim of their own. And I would like to stop them before it gets that far.”

“In that you have my cooperation, Nakabito-san.” Washu said evenly. “I too would like to protect the Earth.”

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

“But I don’t know if even I can build a shield to protect against such a weapon if time is limited.” She added. “I will do my best, but I can’t be sure.”

“Maybe the Earth should be warned, then.” Nakabito said heavily. “But I do want to prevent hysteria.”

He got to his feet, spreading his hands.

“It seems I have much to do.” He added. “Thank you, Professor Hakubi. Your information has been most revealing. I now know how I must proceed.”

With that he was gone, the door of the drive room sliding shut behind him, and for a moment Kiyone and Washu just exchanged

looks. Then, at length, Kiyone plucked up the courage to ask the burning question.

“Well?” She murmured. “Is that weapon... as bad as that? You aren’t... really going to help him, are you?”

Washu frowned.

“He wanted to know whether or not we could stop him, if he decided to deploy his toy against the Earth.” She said quietly. “And also, he hopes that by making us aware of it now, if the Earth were destroyed, he would have expert testimony to call upon against the planet Jurai. He is indeed playing a dangerous game. The trouble is... I don’t know if we can prevent it. If the weapon is truly constructed, and if it is fired at the Earth... I doubt there’ll be anything left. It’s at least as powerful as the cannon I used to destroy Kihaku. The people there won’t stand a chance.”

“Tenchi and Ryoko?” Kiyone paled, and Washu spread her hands.

“Them too, unless we manage to use Ryo Ohki to escape.” She responded gravely. “But that’s complicated in itself. Ryo Ohki brought me to his spaceship this morning — I was surprised when he asked to rendezvous initially away from Headquarters, but I went along with it because I wanted him to trust me. Clearly dropping a few mentions of Kii grievances appealed to his sense of injustice, because I think he fell for them enough to bring me back here. But I don’t want to keep Ryo Ohki waiting any longer than I have to. Things are messy enough on the Earth and now I know for sure why their defences were altered. This is the plan. To destroy the Earth and put the blame at Jurai’s — or to be specific, *Seiryō*’s door. With us as manipulated expert witnesses.”

“Sick.” Kiyone muttered, and Washu shrugged.

“Fanatics generally are.” She agreed grimly. “I wonder what *Seiryō* did to incur the wrath of such a man, though. He literally glimmered with hatred when he spoke his name... something serious, I imagine.”

She glanced at her hands.

“I should go.” She murmured.

“Takamura and Imaguchi wanted to speak to you, too.” Kiyone reminded her, but Washu shook her head.

“There isn’t time. There may not be time, anyway.” She responded. “No, Kiyone. You can tell them what I’ve said, but my priority has to be the Earth, now. I can’t do anything to protect *Seiryō* or help with

their side of the investigation, not when so many people might be in serious danger. He might seem friendly, but that Nakabito's got a lot of darkness swirling inside of him. Whether it's resentment or pure insanity I'm not quite certain. But it's there and it's stronger than anything else. He's lost a battle with himself somewhere along the lines. Sweet as he appears, I imagine it would take very little for him to snap. Be careful."

"I am being," Kiyone assured her. "And all right, if you feel that way, I'll tell the other agents what you said about the weapon. It's a pity he didn't leave that paper with you — the notes would have been a help."

"It wouldn't mean anything to your Agents even if I did." Washu shook her head. "The terms are scientific ones... only an expert in the arms field would understand something so complex."

"An expert... like his brother Akihiro?"

"Exactly." Washu nodded. "That's what I think, too."

"Do you think Jurai really developed this weapon, then? Or is it his brother trying to frame them at that?"

"My suspicions are that the original plan probably is Juraian." Washu admitted. "They're not always responsible when it comes to their breakthroughs, although I imagine nothing would become official until it had been ratified or vetted by some expert or other from the Science Academy. If such a weapon is under construction, I don't think Azusa-sama would be toting it at any planet in his way. It seems more likely to me that its purpose is to clear space debris — if it has any purpose at all. Some of the asteroid belts that flank Juraian space are heavy and dangerous — that would be my impression."

"But Nakabito has found another use for it." Kiyone murmured. "In which case, I shouldn't sit around here either."

She tapped her pocket.

"I ripped some data from his computer earlier on." She admitted. "It's encrypted, I think, but I'm hoping it will mean something to Imaguchi and Takamura. If you're not coming with me, I'd better send them a message and let them know what I've got. In the circumstances, with Nakabito roaming the halls, I'm not sure if it would be safer to meet here or in Imaguchi's office again — but they need to know so I'll have to take a risk and see what they advise me."

"Then I'll take my leave and go find Ryo Ohki." Washu agreed. "Do what you can this end, Kiyone. I'll do what I can mine. It's not just

about protecting Seiryō any more. It's about protecting all life on the Earth — even the idiots. Especially the idiots.”

“I know. I understand.” Kiyone nodded grimly. “And you can count on me. If I have anything to do with it, Nakabito won't ever get to deploy this little project of his against anyone!”

So, that was Washu Hakubi.

As he made his way slowly along the corridor towards his office, Nakabito allowed himself a faint smile as he remembered the scientist's reaction to his information.

“She looked shell-shocked. And determined.” He mused. “And quite rightly too. I presented her with the ultimate evidence that her beloved Earth is about to become space dust. If it does, I doubt she'll be among the victims. She's had warning, and those who have time to prepare rarely perish in incidents like that. However... things are moving along nicely. With her testimony about Jurai's secret weapon, I'm sure that we'll have an open and shut case. In the end, Seiryō's hearing seems to be irrelevant. We *know* he did those things. And we'll make it look like he did these, too. For Kanemitsu's sake... no price is too high for the freedom Mother died believing in, after all.”

He reached into his pocket for his pass key, sweeping it across the lock as he typed his entry code into the keypad, waiting for the soft hiss of the door as it slowly slid back to allow him admittance.

“Akihiro-nii will be pleased.” He reflected, as he glanced at his communications unit for any incoming messages. “His last contact made it clear that the weapon is almost ready for deployment. All I need to do is find a way of getting it from his secret operations base to the Earth's atmosphere without anyone raising an eyebrow. But considering my conversation with Washu-sensei and Kiyone, I think I've begun to form my alibi. After all, a Galaxy Police Agent investigating corruption has a place at any disaster scene. Just a pity if I arrive a little too late to do anything but clean up the political mess.”

He sank down in his chair, pulling open the drawer of his desk and reaching down to loosen the catch that held the hidden tray in place. It sprang forward, but as it did so, a cold chill touched Nakabito's heart.

There was no disk inside.

“What the...” He murmured, his eyes opening wide in disbelief as he glanced around the room, anxiously searching for the missing data

disk. "I left it here — I locked it here... where is it? Who's been in here? What's going on!"

He typed a series of digits into the computer keypad, bringing up the security screening for the time he had been absent, but nothing became immediately apparent. Then, as he re-ran the film for the fifth time, he noticed something odd in the background and he frowned, hitting replay yet again as he focused in on what he had seen.

"The clock." He muttered. "It jumps half an hour here... to here. Someone was in here. Someone powered down my security. And they took my disk?"

He got to his feet, and as he did so, he caught sight of a flickering light on the computer's main console. His eyes widening in surprise, he reached out to touch the release button, watching in disbelief as the drive slid open, revealing the missing disk.

"There." He whispered. "But I always leave it locked away. Is someone on to me? But who...? And how? I was only gone from my office long enough to rendezvous with the Ryo Ohki... someone did this while I was away from the Annexe? While I was talking to Professor Hakubi and Kiyone-san... someone raided my office?"

Anger flickered in his eyes and he paced across the office floor, flinging open the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet as he pulled out a small scanning device.

"Well, whoever you are, you'll have left some clue I can use." He muttered. "And I won't let anyone interfere with my plan now. No matter if you're an agent or who you are. If you think you can intervene... you'll regret it."

He ran the scanner over the computer keys, waiting impatiently for it to give him a reading. For a moment there was nothing, then it beeped and an image flashed up on the screen before him.

His eyes narrowed to near slits as he digested what he was seeing.

"I see." He murmured. "Finger print match... one possible candidate on file. I've underestimated the simplicity of the Regular Division, haven't I, Detective? I won't do so again. You gave testimony against Seiryō Tennan — but now you're spying on *me*? Who are you working for, truly? And what do you seek to achieve?"

His grip on the scanner tightened as he contemplated the deceptive game his young colleague had begun to play.

"Well, it doesn't matter." He decided. "It's not too late yet. Not so

long as I get to you before anyone else does. I didn't intend on killing anyone before we blew up the Earth, but it's unavoidable now. I suppose some sacrifices are impossible to evade... if you're foolish enough to get in the way of justice."

He dropped the scanner on his desk, removing the disk from its drive and sliding it into his pocket.

"This is coming with me, this time." He decided. "I think it's time we took a little trip together, Detective Makibi. I want to know what you're about and who you're working for. You *will* regret trying to make a fool of me, I guarantee it!"

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

“I don’t even know where to begin looking.”

Tenchi sank down onto the sofa in the front room, a mixture of anxiety and despair on his face as he cast Yume a hopeless look. “Yume, if you were Ryoko and you were upset, where would you go? She hasn’t taken Ryo Ohki — or any of her stuff. She’s just gone. Where could she go, considering that?”

“Somewhere to cool down, I imagine.” Yume said softly. “She’s been under a lot of pressure lately. I guess it just got to her in the end. That’s all.”

“I’ve been insensitive, you mean.” Tenchi groaned, rubbing his temples. “But it’s not my fault if noone tells me what the hell is going on, is it?”

“I feel a little guilty for giving myself away so easily.” Yume sighed, leaning up against the wall as she considered. “But really, Tenchi... you should have realised it for yourself. You and Kyoda-san had a fight at the graduation party, didn’t you? And from what Ryoko said, you exchanged some pretty heavy insults. Weren’t you at all suspicious when he called and wanted to be friends?”

“No.” Tenchi admitted. “Perhaps you’re right. Maybe Ryoko is right, too. I don’t know, Yume. Kane and I were good friends before Ryoko came to the Earth. I guess maybe that’s why I trusted him... I don’t want to be at odds with anyone.”

“That’s understandable, but it seems to me that sometimes it’s impossible.” Yume reflected. “From what I’ve seen of human life so far, Tenchi, I don’t think that people are able to get along completely with one another. If you have freedom of thought and feeling, then you have differences in opinion. That’s how it seems to me.”

“Yes, probably.” Tenchi nodded. “But it doesn’t help me find my fiancée. We’ve not fought like that before... she’s never taken off before. It worries me. Washu... the way she was talking... it was almost like she wondered if Ryoko would come back.”

“Ryoko cares more about you than she does herself.” Yume said categorically. “She loves you. If she doesn’t come back it’s probably

more because she wants to protect you than because she hates you. And right now she is being used as a target to further whatever schemes are going on on planet Earth. That being the case, she might feel it's better to just stay away."

"I don't want her to protect me." Tenchi said darkly. "I don't need her to do that... or make crazy decisions like that on my behalf. Even if I am stupid and I trust the wrong people, I can take care of myself."

"True." Yume nodded. "But to do so, you'll have to give away who and what you really are. I think Ryoko wants to make sure noone treats you like the outsider they're treating her as. That's all."

"It sounds like I missed quite a party."

A fresh voice interrupted the conversation at that moment, and both prince and droid turned to see Tenchi's father standing in the doorway, eying them with interest. "Why the gloomy faces, you two? Something major gone on while I was away?"

"Ryoko and I had a fight." Tenchi said flatly. "And she left."

"Left?" Noboyuki's eyes widened in surprise. "You mean you drove out a pretty girl like that? What's the matter with you, Tenchi — didn't I teach you anything at all?"

"It's not a joke, Noboyuki-san." Yume sighed. "Ryoko really has... gone. Washu's taken Ryo Ohki somewhere, too, so we can't even ask her where Ryoko might be. I don't know... it was a big fight, but I think Ryoko's scared to put Tenchi in danger. The Earth are stepping up their anti-alien motif, and Ryoko's already caught in the middle of it."

"Ah yes. That's why I missed my train last night." Noboyuki nodded his head. "Someone decided it would be fun to mass around one of the station entrances and noone could get past without getting petitions and placards waved in their face. It's a concerning sign — and it's bothering Ryoko?"

"Decidedly." Tenchi groaned. "Dad, where you you think she's gone? She can't go into space without Ryo Ohki, so she's on the Earth. But..."

"Perhaps to one of your Osaka friends." Noboyuki ruminated. "Since she seems quite friendly with them these days."

"I suppose she might have gone to Sakura." Tenchi admitted. "But... she's not been willing to go to Osaka these past couple of days, since that idiot Ishida accosted her in the street. Do you really think

that's what she'd do?"

"Ryoko doesn't have many friends on the Earth." Yume reflected. "Noboyuki-san is probably right. Sakura is the obvious choice."

"Then I should give Sakura a call." Tenchi got to his feet, moving towards the phone, but then he paused. "But even if she is at Sakura's, what do I say to her? She reeled off this whole list of things I hadn't even thought about... I don't even know how to begin tackling them. She seems to think that I think she's caused me problems by coming to live here. And yeah, okay, sometimes things have been manic. But I like that she's here. I miss her when she isn't. I'm resigned to the fact my life's a little less ordinary than the average earthling. I wish she's realise that."

Noboyuki eyed him for a moment, then he smiled.

"Sometimes words don't convey everything." He acknowledged, crossing the room towards the bookshelf and running his finger along the edges of the various books, pausing at one and pulling it out. "You know, when I first asked your mother to marry me, she had doubts, too. We were so young, and she knew she was in love with me, but it's a scary prospect. I didn't really know how to tell her how I felt — not properly — so I decided to show her. Sometimes actions... or pictures... speak volumes more than any conversation can."

"Pictures?" Tenchi looked blank, and Noboyuki held out the book, offering a sheepish smile.

"Probably you should have seen these a lot earlier, but your mother's memory is still a bittersweet one for me." He owned. "Still, I know you, Tenchi. And I know how much you've taken to drawing these past few years. I'm sure that you haven't just sketched mountain landscapes, have you?"

"These are... pictures of Mum." Tenchi's eyes widened as he flipped through the book. "Mother and... Dad, you drew these for her?"

"Not so much for her. More for myself." Noboyuki responded. "To tell you the truth, I found it easier to speak that way."

He shrugged, looking embarrassed.

"Achika always loved it when I drew." He added. "Because it was a factor in us coming together in the first place. She'd come out and sit and watch me drawing designs for this house when we were still in High School. And when I drew her, she knew better than anything how I felt. When you're young, it's difficult to say the words you need to, sometimes. And easy to assume and take for granted how the other

person is thinking and feeling.”

Tenchi frowned, then closed the book with a snap, eying his father with understanding.

“You’re right.” He murmured. “And yes, I have drawn other things. Other people. I’ve pictures of everyone who ever came to the Earth... but most of all, I’ve pictures of Ryoko. Because I love her, Dad. And I love drawing. So... I guess maybe I’m more like you than we realised, aren’t I?”

“I suppose you must be.” Noboyuki grinned. “But listen, Tenchi. It’s easy to have a fight and to wind up at crossed purposes. Sometimes words don’t help at all. You can tell Ryoko you love her, but if she’s feeling unsettled, she probably won’t take it in. However...”

“You think I should show her.” Tenchi said softly. “And you’re right. You’re totally right. I need to show her what she means to me — that she inspires me. And that even if Kyoda and the others are causing trouble for her and other aliens on the Earth, I’m not. I’m on her side.”

“Will you call Sakura?” Yume wondered, and Tenchi nodded.

“I guess, to see if that is where she’s gone.” He agreed. “If so, then I’ll get a train out there, and...”

“Hold your horses, Tenchi-kun. We have other things to worry about than your love dilemma right at the moment.”

At that moment Washu strode into the room, interrupting the conversation as she fixed her companions with a troubled glance. On her shoulder, Ryo Ohki let out a whimper and Tenchi frowned, shooting the scientist a startled look.

“Washu? Did you just get back?”

“Yes.” Washu nodded her head. “And I’m afraid Ryoko will have to take care of herself for the time being. Things just got a whole lot more serious — and I may need as much help as I can muster. Especially yours, Tenchi — since you’re probably Earth-born enough that these people might listen to you. Maybe.”

“Washu, what is it?” Yume looked anxious. “What happened this morning?”

“Nakabito... the man we’ve been investigating... seems to be pretty serious about doing major damage to the Earth. And I think he plans on doing it soon.” Washu said grimly. “All the Kii magic in the world won’t be able to protect this planet, if he unleashes what I think he’s

planning to unleash in this direction. I'm not even sure I have the time or the components to construct anything to deflect or defend the planet... but we have no choice but to try. Ryoko can wait. This is more important."

Tenchi eyed her for a moment, and Washu met his gaze with an impatient one of her own.

"Well?" She demanded. "Do you want to see your planet end up the same way mine did?"

"No." Tenchi shook his head. "No, I don't. All right, Washu. If I can help... I'm with you."

Everything somehow seemed so peaceful.

As Seiryō gazed up at the Tennan mausoleum, he frowned, shaking his head as he absently fingered his black and maroon mourning clothes.

"Appearances can be so deceptive." He muttered. "Damn, I'm fed up with this. I need to be busy — be working. I don't care if Kiyone does call it cowardice. The longer I'm at a loose end like this, the more I get in everyone's way. Mother wouldn't have expected it of me, anyway. I'm sure of that. The sooner I get back into routine the better."

At the memory of his mother, a flicker of despair flared up inside him and he clenched his fists, forcing the emotion away.

"I need to pull myself together and get back involved in things." He decided. "Whatever Sasami-sama and my sister think, it's better for me to be busy. I don't deal with things the same way they do. And now Mother is buried — that at least is over and I can't spend all my time at the mausoleum as if I don't know what to do with myself."

He pulled his cloak around him more tightly, turning back towards the pathway that led to the Tennan estate.

"I'll tackle Suki about it this afternoon." He decided. "About going back to Sasami-sama's side and reintegrating myself with the Council. She doesn't seem to need me at home, anyhow, and she and Tokimi both seem to be all right with getting on with things. They can't keep stopping me from doing so. I'll talk to them."

The walk between the two locations was not a long one and he unfastened the door, stepping into the hallway. As he did so, he passed the cloakroom, registering a familiar cape hanging on one of

the hooks and his brows knitted together in confusion.

“Has Sasami-sama come here to discuss the same thing?” He wondered. “So much to the better, if she has. And if she’s here, I can tackle both her and Suki about returning to duty together. That suits..as ever, my Princess has perfect timing.”

He made his way through the house, deciding that the most likely place for Sasami and his sisters to be was in the garden, and as he reached the rear doors he realised his impulse had been right.

“But I don’t understand why not.” He heard Tokimi say. “Suki, why is it bad? I don’t understand.”

Seiryō frowned, pausing as he registered the confusion in his adoptive sister’s tones.

“Why is what bad?” He wondered. “What’s up?”

“Because it’s something that we shouldn’t talk about. That’s all.” Suki said quietly. “Toki-chan, I know that you know what happened to Father. And I know you say Takamura-san is a good person. I’m sure he is. But it would hurt Seiryō and me both, if you told him about it. It’s complicated. After all...”

“But it wasn’t Suki’s fault.” Tokimi sighed. “Would Ryousuke-san think... it was Suki’s fault?”

“Possibly. Or Seiryō’s.” Sasami’s voice joined the conversation at that moment. “So it’s a secret, Tokimi. A big secret. You mustn’t tell anyone.”

“Father?” Seiryō’s eyes widened with surprise. “And... Takamura? Ryousuke Takamura? But...”

He leant back against the wall, remembering with a jolt the sudden and unexpected appearance of Agent Imaguchi at his mother’s memorial.

“Ryousuke and Hideki both?” He murmured. “But... what is going on?”

“Tokimi promises.” The sound of his ward’s voice jerked him back to the conversation and he frowned, inching closer to the crack in the door as he unashamedly listened in on their talk.

“Then it’s settled.” Suki seemed relieved. “I’m sorry we didn’t tell you before, Toki-chan, but I didn’t know you remembered.”

“Tokimi remembers.” Tokimi agreed. “But Tokimi will keep a secret. Is a promise. Tokimi will.”

“That’s all all right, then.” Sasami reflected. “In the meantime, Takeru’s ensured that they can’t come back to Jurai any time soon. So they can’t bother Seiryō with this or anything else while he’s still getting over Kaede-sama’s death. The last thing he needs is all of this dumped on him when he’s obviously upset.”

“All of what?” Seiryō muttered, resisting the urge to spring out and confront the girls head on. “And Takeru? What has *he* to do with this? What’s going on, dammit?”

“That’s something at least.” Suki sighed. “Sasami-chan, thank you. I know that it’s been a pain for you, having Seiryō out of commission. But...”

“No, it’s all right.” Sasami assured her. “You and Seiryō are my friends and that comes first. And neither of you should have to worry about this. I’m sorry that you have been — it’s not fair, when you’re still grieving and everything.”

“So long as the truth about Father stays buried, I think I’m okay.” Suki responded. “But if Seiryō knew all of this was going on...”

She sighed.

“I worry about him at the moment.” She admitted, and Seiryō’s eyes opened wide with consternation as he registered the genuine anxiety in his sister’s voice. “He’s not opening up to me — or anyone, really. I don’t like it when he bottles things up. I worry that they’ll overtake him and he won’t have anyone to turn to. He likes to be the strong one, because he’s the eldest. But he needs to grieve too — and I’m worried that he isn’t letting himself.”

“Kiyo-neesan helped Nii-chan.” Tokimi put in, and Seiryō swallowed hard, inwardly hoping that his foster sister was not about to be indiscreet.

“Kiyone is disconnected from all of this, so I guess it’s easier for him to confide in her because of that.” Suki agreed. “But she couldn’t stay long.”

“That’s probably partly my fault.” Sasami admitted. “I told her about the spy and the hearing and all of those things. I think she went back to investigate... she wanted to keep Seiryō out of everything, too.”

“Ryousuke-san said he’d spoken to Kiyo-neesan.” Tokimi remembered. “Is he helping Kiyo-neesan help Nii-chan?”

“Probably.” Sasami nodded.

“Then why can’t we trust Ryousuke-san?”

“We probably can, but it’s not a good idea to start digging up past things that have been buried.” Suki said categorically. “All right? As it stands, there’s enough trouble without that. And even if Sasami can protect Seiryō from the worst of it with her influence here, I don’t want things becoming more complicated than they already are. If Seiryō knew about any of this, he’d worry. And that’s the last thing I want for my brother right now.”

“There’s not much else we can do, then.” Sasami said frankly. “Except try and make the connection with the Sumire and whoever the crazy people are. Takeru’s doing something like that for me... but right now, I guess we just try and leave it alone. And wait to see what we find out.”

Seiryō slipped away from the door, pausing in the hallway as he digested what he had overheard. His first impulse was to demand answers from the girls themselves, but then, as he remembered the real concern in Suki’s tones he sighed, shaking his head as if to clear it.

“She thinks she’s protecting me.” He murmured. “But from what? Spies... agents from the Galaxy Police... Father’s death? I don’t understand. And Kiyone — Kiyone too? She’s involved in all this? Have I become so blind and wrapped up in my own concerns that I’ve managed to let something big unfold behind my back without my even having noticed it?”

He frowned.

“If Suki wants to keep me out of it, she must really be worried about my mental state.” He muttered. “Have I really been acting that out of it? Maybe I have. It’s true that I haven’t known quite what to do with myself since Mother passed away. But if this concerns me... if this is something I’m involved in...”

The sound of voices alerted him to the fact the group of girls were heading inside and he acted quickly, hurrying out of the corridor and up the main stairway to the upper landing where his own quarters were located. He slipped into his chamber, closing the door and fastening it with a soft click of the lock as he sank down on his bed to consider his options.

“If Ryousuke and Hideki are involved, it must be something fairly major.” He decided. “And if Kiyone is working with them, no doubt she thinks she’s helping me somehow. Suki and the others mentioned Father’s death — but Lord Azusa has declared that a closed case and

Sasami-sama would protect Suki again if it came to it. So there must be something else. What is this about a spy? What spy? If I tackled Takeru about it, would he tell me?"

For a moment he considered this, then he snorted, shaking his head.

"Like hell he would." He muttered. "Even if he is helping Sasami-sama, and even if he did come after me for a truce, it would still be a rare day that he'd put himself out on my behalf."

His eyes narrowed.

"I wonder if his truce has more behind it than the reasons he gave." He added. "Oh, I hate this. I *hate* not knowing what's going on!"

He got to his feet, moving to the window as he gazed out across the horizon.

"It's time I found out." He murmured. "One way or another, if there's something happening and it involves me, it's my right to know the details. And if no one on Jurai will tell me, well, there's one other option. I'll go to the Unko and send a message to Kiyone. Surely if no one else will tell me the truth, she will?"

"This was good work."

Takamura cast Kiyone a warm grin as his colleague hooked the data device up to the main computer, running a critical gaze over the list of files. "Well done, Kiyone-san — you'll make an Elite yet, you know."

"I'm not sure." Kiyone owned, returning the grin with a rueful one of her own. "It was a bit tight — I only just got out before the hack on the security locks wore off. But I think this must be what you wanted me to find. It has some data on there that I can read and I found my own testimony on there — so I guess Operation Eradicate is the project Nakabito and his brother are involved in."

"I'd say so." Imaguchi glanced up from the computer screen, nodding his head. "Although it will take a bit of work to unencrypt these files. They're not done with any cipher I was ever taught — Ryou, what about you?"

"Looks like native Kanemitsu dialect, but I don't speak it myself so I haven't a clue." Takamura shook his head. "We'll have to work on it a bit... from the few phrases I know, it's a scrambled cipher, not just plain text."

“Well, Nakabito is from Kanemitsu. That makes sense.” Imaguchi rubbed his chin. “And he never was so good at the encryption business... I suppose making up his own code from a local dialect was as secure as he and his brother could manage. But it doesn’t help if we can’t read it. As you say, we’ll have to do some further work on that. Kiyone-san, what about Professor Hakubi? Did you manage to speak to her?”

“Yes, but she went back to the Earth.” Kiyone nodded. “After our conversation with Nakabito, she was... a little bit freaked out, I think would be the best way of putting it. She’s worried about this weapon Nakabito and his brother seem to have. Nakabito gave her some information, claiming it was a Juraian weapon that was going to be deployed against the Earth and asking her whether or not anything could be built to stop its damage. Washu wasn’t sure that it was possible... she was really shaken when she read the data he had.”

“I suppose you don’t have a copy of that file?” Takamura asked, and Kiyone shook her head.

“Washu said it was written in terms only a weapons expert would understand, although the spec is probably somewhere in that glory box of files.” She said, gesturing to the computer screen.

“Washu Hakubi is a weapons expert... I see.” Imaguchi’s eyes narrowed. “Then it is the case that she was the one who deployed arms into the dead planet of Kihaku?”

“Nakabito believes it was Jurai, but yes, it was Washu.” Kiyone agreed. “As you said, the planet was dead. But it’s spirit wasn’t. To free her sister Tokimi and to free Seiryō and all the others under the spell... it was the only thing she could do. I don’t imagine it was easy for her.”

“So she has possession of a weapon not unlike what Nakabito and company have?”

“Maybe. I don’t know if she still has it or if it was destroyed in the aftermath — I was comatose at the time.” Kiyone admitted. “Why — are you going to arrest her because of that?”

“No, believe me, arresting a woman with a planet-destroying arsenal is not always a wise move.” Imaguchi smiled. “I just wanted some gauge as to her level of expertise. Her judgement regarding this weapon... it seems like it’s sound, if she’s constructed such things herself.”

“Washu is a genius.” Kiyone said softly. “A little nuts at times, but

she truly is, Imaguchi-san. If she says it that way, it is. And she's worried. She went back to the Earth because she hopes there's something she can do to defend it, but she's not sure even she has the time or the components to act in time. Which means that somehow Nakabito has to be stopped at this end, doesn't it? And you need to act on what's on that disk."

"Guess so." Takamura agreed.

"She also told me that you should leave Seiji Tennan's death alone — that it hasn't any benefit to the case and it won't help Seiryō or his family." Kiyone chewed on her lip. "Before you ask me, I don't know what she means or what she knows. She's never told me. But she's had access to the files Zero recorded when Seiji died. And that's her judgement. She gave me her word that the death of Seiji Tennan was by his own misadventure — and that you were wasting time looking into it. All it could do is add ammunition to Nakabito's fire, if you tried to dig it up."

"Well, right now we have other things which are more pressing." Imaguchi leant back on his chair. "I wish we did have Seiryō along the corridor for this one, Ryou. He'd crack this in half the time we will. But we don't, so I guess the sooner we start, the sooner we'll get enough to hit Nakabito with whatever evidence we have and prevent this little scheme from taking off."

"Then I'll leave you both to it." Kiyone said with a grin. "And go back to looking over some regular division stuff. I think I've done everything I can do for you on this — make sure it turns out okay, won't you?"

"We'll do our best." Takamura nodded. "Thank you for your help, Kiyone-san. I don't know what Seiryō's done to inspire such loyal friendship, but I'm glad he did it. We wouldn't have moved this on quite so far as we have without your help."

Kiyone pinkened slightly, shrugging her shoulders.

"To be honest, I don't really know either." She admitted. "Just that I don't want him hurt any more, that's all. He's an arrogant idiot sometimes and he brings crap onto his own head because of it. But... he was really upset by Kaede-sama's death. And I guess... once I realised what was going on, I had to do something. And now I know the implications for the Earth, well, it's gone beyond Seiryō. I lived there when Mihoshi and I were stationed in that zone. I have friends there... and a lot of fondness for it as a planet. I don't want it destroyed."

“Nor do we.” Imaguchi said darkly. “Let’s hope thanks to your little spy detail we’ll be able to prevent it. Thank you, Kiyone-san. If you ever want an Elite favour, let us know, all right?”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Kiyone’s eyes twinkled. “I better go back to my own caseload, though. Mihoshi will be back from Seniwa before I know it, and I’ll have got nothing at all done in the meantime!”

As she left the office, heading back along the corridors towards her own quarters, she pursed her lips, a mixture of feelings swirling in her mind.

“I’m glad it’s over. What I’ve done so far — that I don’t have to do anything more.” She realised. “Much as I want to help, I suppose I realised I’m really not an Elite — not properly. And it has brought back memories — of when Seiryō assaulted me. I suppose it is a dangerous game. Like Mihoshi said, perhaps it is a cursed job. Either way, I’m glad I can walk away from it and know I’ve done my bit without throwing myself into the firing line. With any luck, Seiryō’s reputation will be intact, and Nakabito will be stopped, and everything will be fine. At least, it will until Mihoshi gets back and starts reorganising my office filing system again — but those things are just a normal part of life. I almost miss it, when she’s gone.”

She sighed, running her fingers through her hair as she keyed in the security code for her room with her free hand.

“Everything always seems more stressful but less serious when Mihoshi’s around.” She reflected. “It will be good to have her back.”

She pushed open the door, stepping into her office and pausing as she noticed the communication device on her desk flashing.

“A message?” She murmured. “Who’s calling me? Has Mihoshi actually remembered my office call-code or is it something else? Washu? But she’d call Yagami... who’d be putting a message through here all of a sudden?”

She crossed the floor, reaching across to switch on the communicator, selecting the message and hitting play.

“Kiyone, it’s Seiryō.” A hazy image flickered up before her, and she frowned, her eyes narrowing as she took in the preoccupation in his expression. “I’d appreciate it if you’d return this message as soon as you get it. I’ve also contacted Yagami, but the communicator wasn’t picking up my signal so I thought I’d try here. It is a matter of some urgency, and I don’t wish to discuss it over such an insecure network — so please return my call as soon as you are able. With thanks — the Unko, over and out.”

“What the hell’s eating him all of a sudden?” Kiyone’s brows knitted as she reached over to switch off the communicator. “He looked bothered... but if this is like before... I can’t just take off to Jurai again. Not right now... it’d be too difficult to explain and it might even seem suspicious!”

“Suspicious indeed, Detective.”

A soft voice from behind her made her jump, her heart skipping a beat as she swung around to face Nakabito, leaning up against the door of her office, his arms folded casually across his chest as he gazed at her with a level, interested look in his eyes. She drew breath sharply, taking a step backwards, and the agent nodded his head, offering her a faint, amused smile.

“You’re cleverer than I thought you were, and also more duplitious.” He said quietly. “You had me convinced you were Seiryō’s enemy — even that you were on my side, and for that you have my respect. I’m not someone who’s easily fooled. You even managed to slip into my office when I was away from it — and I very nearly didn’t notice that you had. But you made one fatal mistake... and I suppose in the end that is the difference between an agent of the Elite and a Regular Division detective. Isn’t it?”

“What... what do you mean?” Kiyone asked hesitantly, taking another step towards her desk as she remembered her stun weapon was safe and sound in the top drawer. Nakabito’s smile widened and he tut-tutted softly under his breath.

“You seem so innocent.” He reflected. “But you can’t fool me a second time. You left your fingerprints all over my computer, Kiyone. But I wouldn’t have even thought to check — if you hadn’t forgotten to return my disk to its hiding place before you absconded with my secure information.”

Kiyone’s eyes widened and she muttered a curse under her breath. Nakabito nodded.

“Quite.” He said amiably. “Which means you and I need to have a little chat about leaking secure information belonging to an Elite of the Galaxy Police, don’t we? You do realise that it’s a criminal offence to break into a superior’s office and steal classified file information? Particularly if you are — as I think you are — stealing it to pass it on to the planet Jurai?”

“You’re involved in something evil.” Kiyone said quietly. “I don’t condone innocent people being hurt, not even if you do have a valid political point. I don’t know if you do or not — I don’t really care

whether Kanemitsu are independant or if they aren't. I'm not Juraian and I've not fed any information about you to them — that's the truth. I'm not in their pockets, you know. I only believe in doing the right thing. And killing the people on Earth is not right. I have friends there. They're good people. And I won't let it happen."

"The Earth." Nakabito snorted. "A pathetic world of infighting primitives? You can't seriously expect me to consider them as a proper civilisation?"

"Yes, I do." Kiyone met his gaze head on. "Or are you a hypocrite as well as a fanatic, Nakabito-san? Didn't you complain about how Juraians walk all over other worlds in the pursuit of their own goals? Well, you're no different, planning the Earth's demise in order to achieve your own political ends. I guess the Kanemitsu apple doesn't fall far from the Juraian tree after all, does it? You might consider yourselves different, but really you're just the same!"

"And *you* testified against a noble of Jurai who apparently tried to kill you, but now you're receiving social calls from him on *very* intimate first name terms." Nakabito's eyes darkened. "You can't expect me to believe you have no connections to that damned place, Kiyone. I'm not so naive as that."

Kiyone bit her lip, regretting her bluntness as she remembered Washu's warning about Nakabito's unstable mental state. He was not someone she could reason with, she realised that now. His friendly facade masked a dangerous, embittered persona beneath and in a few short words she had managed to excite his temper.

She cast a fleeting glance towards the desk, wondering whether she could grab her weapon before he could reach her, and at her action, Nakabito laughed.

"I imagine you think that you can stun me and escape." He said evenly, and Kiyone stared at him in alarm. Nakabito cocked his head, eying her for a moment. Then he held up his hand, and Kiyone gasped, registering her stun gun between his fingers. He nodded.

"You raided my office. I thought this was a fair reprisal." He said simply. "So you have a choice. You can come with me of your own accord, or you can be taken by force. I don't mind which. It's up to you."

"And what are you going to do with me then?"

"Interrogate you, as per my brief as an Agent of the Elite." Nakabito said calmly. "I'll find you're a conspirator in Jurai's plot.

Unfortunately you might die during questioning — but such things do occasionally happen.”

“Then like hell am I coming with you anywhere!” Kiyone exclaimed, charging towards him as she desperately tried to catch him off balance. For a moment she thought she’d succeeded, but then she heard the soft click of the weapon trigger and suddenly everything began to go in slow motion as darkness swirled around the edges of her vision.

“I did tell you.” Somewhere in the background, she was aware of Nakabito’s voice. “Escape wasn’t one of the options. I guess you’ll be coming with me by force then. That suits me. Either way the end result will be the same.”

Kiyone struggled to retain consciousness, but it was to no avail, and as she sank to the floor, she found that even her emotions had become numb in the flare of the stun gun’s blast.

That was the last thought she had, as she slumped against her captor, and the world around her descended completely into darkness.

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

“Well, this is getting us nowhere.”

Imaguchi sat back in his chair, casting his companion a helpless look. “It’s no good, Ryou. No matter how I feed this into the computer, it’s not giving me anything but gobbledigook in return. I hate to admit it, but even if Nakabito’s cipher is crude, it’s not something I can crack.”

“Let me look.” Takamura bit his lip, coming to stand behind his colleague as he gazed at the text on the screen. “Oh. Ouch. Yes that doesn’t make a lot more sense, does it?”

“Kanemitsu’s dialect isn’t programmed into this thing. Noone uses it any more, not even the people there as a rule.” Imaguchi rubbed his temples. “We’re up against another brick wall, aren’t we?”

“And after Kiyone went to all that trouble.” Takamura grimaced. “We have the evidence but we can’t read it and make it back up the suspicions we all have.”

“So then we need to find a second plan of action.” Imaguchi reached for his communicator. “I’m going to see if I can get a hold of Kiyone again. I know we said her role in this was done, Ryou, but I have a feeling we might need her connections. Most specifically, it would help to speak to this Professor Hakubi after all. She’s the only one who saw that document, after all, and I want to know more about that evidence. Since it came from Nakabito, it might be something we can use. And Kiyone did say she was friendly with some of Jurai’s royalty. Perhaps we can get her to persuade them to let us go back there again — surely someone on that rock must be able to decipher Kanemitsu script?”

“I guess.” Takamura frowned. “It’s sort of pathetic, in a way, that we have to keep calling on a Regular Detective for help like this.”

“True, but I wouldn’t say Kiyone was an ordinary Regular Detective.” Imaguchi admitted. “Whatever her reasons are for not becoming an elite, it’s a criminal waste of natural talent.”

“Rather like Seiryo, then.” Takamura reflected, sinking down into his seat, and Imaguchi grimaced, nodding his head.

“Another person whose help we could use right now.” He agreed, keying in the number to contact Kiyone’s communicator. He waited for a moment, but no connection was put through, and he frowned, shaking his head.

“She’s not answering.” He murmured. “She did say she was going back to her office, right?”

“She did, but she might be on her ship. Yagami.” Takamura suggested. “Try that.”

“Call code for Yagami.” Imaguchi scanned down the screen, selecting the option he wanted. “True enough. I forgot about that... I’m really not on the ball today.”

“You’re tired. We both are. And pressure is mounting.” Takamura told him. “And there you are — Yagami’s call sign. You can connect to that, right?”

“I can try.” Imaguchi nodded, typing in the relevant digits and hitting the connect button.

He frowned.

“Connection not available.” He murmured. “Ryou, I’m getting a bad feeling about this. If she isn’t in her office and she isn’t on Yagami... the ship is definitely still in dock, and noone’s taken any kind of steps to shift it out into space or asked for clearance to travel. It’s docked. See? But she’s not on board — or if she is, she’s not answering her communicator.”

“That doesn’t sound like Kiyone.” Takamura’s brows knitted together. “Let me see that... Yagami is fully docked?”

“Yes.” Imaguchi gestured to the screen, and Takamura’s eyes narrowed. He gestured to the bottom of the diagram, pursing his lips.

“Yagami is.” He murmured. “But Nakabito’s ship the Inazuma is not. Look, Hide. He’s snuck out without or noticing it.”

“So he has.” Imaguchi acknowledged, bringing up a closer diagram of the Elite landing bay and clicking on the list of clearances. “Without official designation to leave... he’s just upped and disappeared from base without even logging his departure. I know we can come and go as we please, Ryou, but we are at least meant to log in when we’re planning to pull out just in case of collisions. He’s not done that. He’s just... gone.”

“I have a bad feeling about this.” Takamura admitted, and Imaguchi nodded grimly, getting to his feet as he flicked off his

screen.

“Me too.” He owned, reaching down to disconnect the hacked data drive and slipping it into his pocket. “Come on. If Kiyone’s put herself in danger on our account, it’s up to us to make sure no harm comes to her.”

“We’re going to have a job tracking the Inazuma without knowing what the hell is on that file. We only have a vague, theoretical idea of Nakabito’s plans as it is.” Takamura objected. Imaguchi nodded.

“True for you, but desperate times call for desperate measures.” He said frankly. “We’re going to take a little trip to Juraian air space, Ryou. Whether they arrest us or not, I don’t care. We’re going to speak to Seiryō and we’re not taking no for answer — we need his encryption skills, no matter what the hell has happened to his mental state of late. Nakabito’s making his move and it might be more than Kiyone’s life that’s at stake if we hesitate.”

Takamura was silent for a moment, then he nodded his head.

“All right.” He said quietly. “Let’s go.”

So far, so good.

Nakabito glanced impatiently up at the flickering lights of the abandoned space complex, drumming his fingers on the dashboard of his spacecraft as he waited for the signal that seemed to never come. Akihiro had always been the more laid back of the brothers, he reflected darkly as he resisted the urge to pace about the deck of his ship, but in a situation like this, time was surely of the essence.

He flashed his lights once more in the agreed signal, and at last, an answering flare came from the southern-most tip of the asteroid-beaten metal shell. Within a few moments, Nakabito could make out the distinctive shape of a transport pod hazing through the battered cargo bay doors and out towards the Inazuma’s more sophisticated landing point. He sighed, reaching across to release the airlock.

“You take too damn long sometimes.”

As his brother stepped into the drive room, unbuttoning his jacket, Nakabito rounded on him, sending him a reproachful glare. “I thought you understood we were working to a specific timescale — I’ve got a lot on the line here, and so have you.”

“You’re always in such a hurry. Slow and steady wins the race.” Akihiro reflected, eying his brother keenly. “You’re more agitated than

usual, little brother. What's the problem? Is the pressure getting a little too much in that police-infested base of yours? Some of your colleagues getting ready to turn the screw? Because shortly they'll have a whole new investigation on their hands — I wouldn't worry too much."

"It's more complicated than that." Nakabito snapped, grabbing his brother by the arm and forcibly pulling him through the drive room doors and down the steps to the ship's engine room. "It's not just a matter of turning the screw, Oniichan. I think it's already been turned — what I don't know is by how much."

As he finished speaking, they entered the engine room proper and at the sight of the huddled form against the wall, Akihiro let out a curse.

"What the hell have you done, little brother?" He demanded. "I thought we agreed that this wasn't going to involve hostages and all of those messy things?"

"It wasn't exactly by choice, but I had to do something." Nakabito retorted. "The girl was spying on me — I found her prints in my office and God knows what she's already dug up. I had to bring her with me... as it is, I don't know who she's working for or who she's reporting back to. But I'm fairly sure it's probably Jurai... in which case, we need to move fast."

Akihiro's eyes narrowed, and he crouched down at the hostage's side, reaching out to touch her cheek gently.

"She's not dead." He murmured, and Nakabito shook his head.

"No. I want to ask her a few things first." He acknowledged. "There's nowhere she can go, though. She fell foul of her own stun weapon, and it seems to have knocked her for six quite adequately — but she'll probably start to come to, soon. And then we can find out what exactly she's taken from my office. And who she's reporting to."

"She's pretty." Akihiro reflected. "But she doesn't look much like a spy. That's Regular Division clothing, isn't it? Junichi, you're getting to be a lax fool if you can let one of your inferior officers run you this ragged."

"It's more complicated than that." Nakabito responded, and Akihiro snorted.

"You don't mean you fell for her and she double-crossed you?"

"No, of course not!" Indignant anger flushed through Nakabito at

this. “You know that there’s only one woman that I’ll ever love and it’s not this one! No... it’s something else. I don’t understand her motives — but I’m pretty sure she’s working for Seiryō Tennan in some respect. In which case...”

“In which case, you want to slit her throat to pay him back for Yuriko’s death.” Akihiro sighed, rubbing his temples. “So you have made it personal, after all. What did I tell you, Junichi — if you lose your focus, the game is up. As it is...”

“As it is, the plan’s still in operation.” Nakabito said softly. “Tennan sent her a message asking her to make contact, on a matter of some urgency. Which suggests that, as yet, Kiyone here hasn’t made a formal report to him or Jurai about my actions. Or yours, for that matter. But we don’t have a lot of time. So the best thing is to shift our plans forward and act as soon as possible. Before anyone notices Kiyone isn’t at Headquarters in her office where she should be.”

“I suppose there’s no choice.” Akihiro said heavily, getting to his feet as he sent his brother a resigned look. “Considering. I should have known better than to trust you with so many secrets, shouldn’t I? As it is...”

“As *it is*, you’ve needed my connections as much as I’ve needed yours, Oniichan.” Nakabito said darkly. “Don’t forget that. This is a team effort and it still is. Between us, we’ll achieve what Mother never did — Kanemitsu’s freedom.”

“Let’s hope so.” Akihiro said soberly. “Considering that it involves slitting the throat of a pretty girl just because she got in the way.”

“You’re not so squeamish about blowing up the Earth.”

“The Earth is different. Call its people martyrs to the Kanemitsu cause.” Akihiro turned back towards the drive room. “It’s sad, but a necessary sacrifice for the future of our planet — it’s not personal, it’s political. On the other hand...”

He gestured to the unconscious form of Kiyone, shrugging his shoulders.

“That’s personal.” He concluded. “You messed up. It’s different.”

“Well, you needn’t worry. I’ll be the one doing the killing.” Nakabito said quietly. “You don’t need to get your hands dirty at all — if you’re so concerned about it, I’ll do it when we’re well away from this place. I had thought of ditching her on the Earth, but it’s too risky, in case she comes around before I have a chance to hit the laser button. So I’ll kill her on board the ship and jettison her into space or

something — don't worry. It will have nothing to do with you."

"If you say so." Akihiro frowned. "All right. So you're saying that you want me to fix the weapon to the Inazuma now, then? That you're determined to carry out the final stage of our plan? The weapon is finished but I haven't completely run through all the rigorous testing — are you sure you want to do this without my having completed the safety checks?"

"I have faith in your construction and in Jurai's weapon planning." Nakabito said grimly. "Don't worry. It will be all right."

"I have made changes from the original Juraian plans, though." Akihiro admitted. "It seems that what they were working on was designed to obliterate space debris — but I've made it stronger. Strong enough to destroy the Earth in one, maybe two blasts. However... the power required is tremendous. Your ship might well support one, or even two attacks. But no more than that. You try and you'll be stranded in space without a power source — so use it carefully, okay? Don't let yourself get emotional and distracted, Junichi. I'm going to be counting on you to pull this off."

"Don't worry. I'll be just fine." Nakabito said firmly. "I know what I have to do and now I'm twice as determined to do it. Everything will be fine, Oniichan. Leave it to me."

"So that's everything I've been able to find on the Sumire, just like you asked for."

Takeru spread the documents out on the table and Sasami frowned, peering at them one at a time as she digested the information.

"Everything?" She murmured. "This is the list of all the people who died, yes? This one here?"

"Yes." Takeru confirmed. "All the members of Kumashiro-san's party, plus the Galaxy Police Agents who were in escort. I don't know what you're looking for, Sasami-chan, but that's the best I could do."

"Tsunami is sure it has something to do with Kanemitsu. She feels strongly that people there are unhappy and that they have been since Yugi's attack." Sasami said softly. "And I'm sure there's something that is a clue here, only I don't know what I'm looking for. The Agents who came to speak to us were called Imaguchi and Takamura. But there's no one on this list by that name, so I guess maybe they did come to help after all. Still, even so, digging into Seiji-sama's death is not a good thing."

She sighed, glancing up at her brother-in-law in frustration.

"I want to be useful and help, like Ayeka does." She admitted. "But I feel like even with Tsunami's help, I don't know what's going on."

"I think I know how you feel." Takeru said ruefully. "I feel rather the same myself about this case, to be honest. We've taken steps and shut the Galaxy Police out of Juraian affairs as much as possible although perhaps in some respects we should be working with them, not against them. You're certain all of this is connected to the Sumire? And that someone in the Galaxy Police is connected to it, too?"

"Yes." Sasami sighed. "Takeru, did you manage to get a list of the Galaxy Police agents who are from Kanemitsu, too?"

"Somewhat." Takeru pushed forward a separate sheet of paper. "The Commander didn't really like my question, and he was loath to give me much of an answer. But I told him it was a political Juraian matter and that the Emperor needed his cooperation."

He sighed.

"I feel like a co-conspirator in some dark plot, since Azusa-sama doesn't know anything about this yet and nor does Lord Haru." He added. "But you asked, Sasami-chan. And I don't really feel I can refuse the Goddess of all Jurai."

"I don't feel much like a Goddess right now." Sasami responded sadly. "But if I can at least be a good friend and keep Suki and Seiryō safe from harm, that's what matters to me at the moment. And the Earth, if the Earth is in danger. I want to help them too."

She lay the two documents side by side, running her finger alongside the names as she digested the information. For a moment there was silence, and then she gasped, her eyes widening as she glanced up at her companion.

"Sasami-chan?" Takeru looked startled, and Sasami pointed, excitement flaring in her crimson eyes.

"Look, Takeru." She murmured. "Arisa Nakabito. And look. *Junichi* Nakabito. Those two names connect. A dead negotiator on the Sumire and a living Galaxy Police Agent. Is it too convenient? Do you think it could be important?"

"You think Jurai should extend an invitation to this Agent Nakabito and find out?" Takeru asked softly, and Sasami hesitated, then nodded her head.

"I think it might be best." She agreed. "And we'll talk to Father,

too. This is his department, after all. He should be involved, so long as we don't mention Seiryō's father in all of this."

She dimpled, offering him a smile.

"Thank you for keeping Suki's secret." She added. "I'm glad you understand."

"Well, I won't pretend that acting politically without Ayeka is easy." Takeru admitted. "And knowing a secret of that nature is problematic, too. But Suki... I don't think that it would be right to drop the law on her right now. Especially if she's right and Seiryō would try to take responsibility. He would never forgive me, if I launched some kind of attack on his sister and brought this all into the open now."

He bit his lip.

"It's difficult in some ways, given the past, but I don't want to be at odds with him any more." He added. "I'm determined to respect him and keep him as an ally of our family. Now I know about the Prince to come, it's more important to me than ever to squash this rivalry. I don't want to have a divided court for my son as he grows up. And Seiryō is your advisor. I'm Ayeka's husband. Conflicts in interest will occur if the bad blood between the Tennans and the Imadas is allowed to continue."

He groaned, rubbing his temples.

"I suppose this is what it means to be a Prince Consort and not just another noble son." He admitted. "This is the overview I've always lacked — the ability to be neutral and work alongside all for the benefit of Jurai's stability. It's complicated and full of pitfalls, but I won't have my wife worried by anything at the moment. So I suppose the sooner I learn about things like this the better it will be."

"We'll learn together, Takeru-niisan." Sasami grinned. "Won't we?"

"Lady Sasami!"

Before Takeru could respond, the door of the chamber was flung open, and Sasami's eyes widened as she registered Azaka in the doorway.

"Azaka?" She murmured, getting to her feet. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt your private conversation, Hime." Azaka said gravely. "But it seems we have some unwanted guests... agents from the Galaxy Police who Lord Takeru informed had no right of

entry here. They're demanding an audience with Lord Tennen — or with you yourself, my Lady. They seem quite determined."

"They have been told." Takeru said darkly. "Restrain them by force if need be — they have no right to be here."

"No... wait." Sasami held up her hands. "Imaguchi and Takamura... yes?"

"Yes, my Lady."

Sasami's brows knitted, and Takeru sent her a surprised look.

"Sasami?" He murmured. "Are you changing your mind about these men?"

"No." Sasami shook her head. "But I want to speak to them, I think. I'll come with you to them, Azaka. They're not allowed to be here, and they will get into a lot more trouble if Father finds out they're here."

"As you wish, Sasami-hime." Azaka agreed. "This way."

Sasami nodded, following the Knight through the hallways of the palace towards the landing bay, where a minor commotion was in play. In the midst of Jurai's guardsmen she recognised the blue of the Elite uniform, and she bit her lip, then she held up her hands.

"Enough!" She exclaimed, and at her voice, silence fell. As one person the guards swung around, dropping in a bow before her and the two agents, finding themselves freed from indignant Juraian grasps pushed forward, bowing their heads before her.

"Lady Sasami, we're sorry for the intrusion." Takamura said quietly. "But this is a matter of urgency. A matter of life and death."

My brother in law Lord Takeru issued orders to you both about your coming here. "Sasami said quietly, inwardly hoping that she appeared more composed and decided than she felt inside." Why have you chosen to challenge that order? My Father won't look kindly on people who come here against Imperial orders, you know."

"Your Lord Father is a wise man." Imaguchi said evenly. "However, my colleague is right. Lady Sasami, I understand that you and your honoured family seek only to protect Juraian interests. In this, I think, we may well be the same. Only our interests are not only Jurai's. Once more, I must beg of you — we need to speak to Seiryō Tennen."

"You have already been told..." Sasami began, but Takamura shook his head.

"Please, Sasami-hime, hear us out." He said urgently. "We've been

conducting an investigation into the spy who was here on Jurai and a matter of grave corruption within the Galaxy Police. It involves Kanemitsu extremists and we have reached a point where we know the guilty party by name. But we cannot do anything to stop him and we do not currently know where he is. All we have is an encrypted file, and we are unable to decode it. Even with Seiryō's personal circumstances, we need his help."

"I..." Sasami faltered, then she frowned.

"Seiryō isn't an Agent of the Elite any more." She reminded them. "Surely there are other agents with encrypting skills?"

"Perhaps there are, but we're in a hurry." Imaguchi said frankly. "Sasami-hime, a man named Junichi Nakabito has been plotting with others against Jurai. They plan, we believe, to blow up the Earth using stolen weapons intelligence to make it look like the attack was Juraian. The scapegoat in all this seems likely to be Seiryō himself. More to the point, a Regular Division detective who claims an acquaintance with you has put her life in considerable danger to help us — and we are now unable to track her whereabouts. We believe that she is probably aboard Nakabito's spacecraft and that wherever they have gone is some secret hideout, but we have no way of finding it without cracking the files on that disk."

"A Detective?" Sasami whitened. "Kiyone?"

"As you say, my Lady." Takamura agreed. "We don't know at this point whether Kiyone is alive or dead. All we know is that she's not in her office or anywhere at Headquarters. Both of us believe Nakabito has taken her as a hostage. We also believe he won't kill her until he's extracted information from her. However, time is running out. Seiryō's encryption expertise is needed. I understand the demands we're putting on you and that our behaviour is unreasonable... but we want to prevent bloodshed if we can. We want to protect the Earth and Jurai — and we want to recover Kiyone Makibi alive."

"Kiyone." Sasami's eyes flickered with dismay. "I see. I didn't... I knew she was involved, but I didn't... but you have to realise, Seiryō..it's been..."

"It's all right, Sasami-sama."

A fresh voice joined the discussion at that moment, and Sasami turned, her eyes widening as she saw her advisor standing a few feet away. There was an impassive, unreadable expression on his face, but Sasami knew her friend too well and she could see the faint flickers of both anxiety and anger burning in his teal gaze.

“Seiryō!” Imaguchi exclaimed, and Seiryō turned, inclining his head slightly.

“It seems that I’ve been kept in the dark rather a lot of late.” He murmured. “I’m unsure whether to put it down to my own carelessness of observation, or your skill in protecting me, Sasami-sama.”

“Seiryō, we...” Sasami faltered, then, “We didn’t want you to be put under pressure while things were so... awkward.” She admitted.

Seiryō pursed his lips, offering her a faint smile.

“I see.” He said softly. “I understand your concern, and I realise that my sister has probably had something to do with this, too. However...”

His eyes narrowed.

“Kiyone’s life is in danger.” He murmured. “Isn’t that what you said, Ryousuke?”

“We fear so.” Takamura agreed. “It’s the only thing that fits — that both Nakabito and Kiyone left Headquarters together... destination unknown.”

“It seems that, wittingly or not, I have been somehow the cause of this?” Seiryō asked, and Sasami shook her head.

“It’s not your fault.” She began. “Anyone who wants to blow up the Earth is obviously nuts to begin with!”

“Perhaps so.” Seiryō’s expression darkened. “But I heard your conversation just now. Junichi Nakabito is the man suspected of perpetrating these crimes. Correct?”

“Yes.” Imaguchi said frankly. “It’s more than suspicion. We have the evidence, we just can’t crack it.”

“That man...” Seiryō paused for a moment, and Sasami saw the anger flare in his malachite gaze once more.

“Seiryō?” She murmured, and the noble turned towards her, offering her a resigned, troubled smile.

“It is not ideal.” He admitted. “But if this is somehow connected to me then I have no other option. Regardless of my personal situation — I must do what I can to rectify it.”

“Are you sure about that?” Sasami looked anxious. “Suki will be worried.”

“Yes, maybe, but I’m quite sure.” Seiryō agreed. “If my skills can be of some use, then I will use them with pleasure. I am not so weak as maybe people think, Sasami-sama. I appreciate your attempts to protect me... but I won’t stand by if Kiyone’s life is in peril.”

He took a couple of steps forward, holding out his hand to Imaguchi.

“Give me the disk.” He said briskly. “If Junichi Nakabito is involved in this then I’ve twice as much reason to be involved. And if he’s hurt her...”

A dark look flickered into his expression, as Imaguchi passed him the data drive.

“We’ll go to the Unko.” He said quietly. “Sasami-sama, with your permission, I will do what I can to assist Agents Takamura and Imaguchi in bringing Nakabito to justice.”

Sasami gazed at him for a moment, seeing a flicker of the Galaxy Police Agent in his demeanour, despite his fine Juraian clothing. Slowly she sighed, nodding her head.

“Suki is going to kill me, but I can tell I won’t talk you out of it.” She said sadly. “All right. But Seiryō, be careful. Don’t get hurt. And make sure Kiyone doesn’t, too. Please.”

Seiryō’s lips thinned at this, and Sasami’s eyes widened as she interpreted the genuine distress in his gaze.

“I will do whatever it takes to ensure Kiyone’s safety.” He murmured. “Have no fear, Princess. I will find her — and all will be well. Junichi Nakabito will not get the better of me... on that you have my word.”

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

Morning in Osaka.

A pensive look on her face, Ryoko rested her hands on the windowsill of Sakura's front room, gazing across the uneven city horizon as she reflected on the previous night's events. Despite how tired she was, she had had little sleep, her dreams haunted by the argument with her fiancé interspersed with memories from the long distant past. It had, therefore, been with some relief that she had registered the first rays of the sun glimmering in the east — at last the night was at an end. She had sat there, watching the gradual rise of the sun for the past three or four hours without really absorbing the beauty in front of her — the situation with Tenchi bore heavily on her mind and the constant, gentle probing of Ryo Ohki's concerned thoughts did nothing to help her settle her composure.

The night was over and now it was morning. But what decision should the morning bring?

"You still haven't called him, have you?"

At the sound of Sakura's voice, Ryoko turned, casting her friend a rueful smile as she slowly shook her head.

"To be honest, I'm not sure if I even should." She said honestly. "I said a lot of stuff yesterday. And he's probably pretty angry about some of it. Besides... right now, I'm not sure what I should be doing. Sakura, does it bother you if I stay here a couple of days? I know it's not ideal, but..."

"Hey, you don't even need to ask." Sakura responded, sinking down onto the edge of the sofa with a smile. "So long as you don't mind camping out in the lounge of a one-bed apartment, I don't mind a roommate. But you should call him, Ryoko. I'm sure he's worried sick about you. I would be, if I was him — you should at least let him know you're safe, even if you're not ready to talk things through yet."

"He's not tried to call here, though." Ryoko said softly. "Even Tenchi's not so stupid as to be ignorant of where I'd go. There aren't that many options and Ryo Ohki's still at home. So..."

"Maybe he's feeling the same way you are — did you think of

that?" Sakura suggested. "Perhaps he doesn't want to call you in case you're mad at him. And besides, even if it is logical to assume you'd come here, Ryoko — you're not always a logical person. He might have thought that because I'm his friend too, you wouldn't come to me. You never know."

"I'm illogical, huh?" Ryoko snorted. "Maybe I am. And I have put you in the middle. It's just..."

"You and Tenchi are both my friends." Sakura held up her hands. "But you were the one who asked for my help last night. Tenchi hasn't. So I'm not choosing sides or putting myself in the middle of anything at the moment. I do think you need to talk to one another — but hey, what do I know about relationships anyway?"

She pursed her lips.

"Hungry?" She added. "I was going to heat something for breakfast. It won't be fancy, because I've not had a proper chance to stock up on food yet. But I'm sure I can put something together."

"I guess." Ryoko nodded. "Okay. Thanks, Sakura. I'm owing you a lot of favours at the moment."

"I'm sure they're already repaid, considering how much universe-saving you and Tenchi seem to do." Sakura was amused. "I'll see what I can do."

As she headed back into the kitchen, Ryoko was aware of the sound of the doorbell, and she tensed, biting her lip.

"Sakura?" She called. "Someone at the door!"

"Can you get it?" Sakura called back. "I literally just began cooking and I've already got fishy fingers!"

"I guess." Ryoko frowned. "All right. I'll go. Just don't blame me if it's the anti-alien squad coming to interrogate you as a traitor to the Earth, okay?"

"You're so melodramatic." Was the unsympathetic response. "It's probably just my neighbour bringing by the morning post. He's over-helpful like that."

Ryoko grimaced, but headed obediently into the hallway, reaching up to flick back the catch as she pulled open the door.

"Ryoko!" Hiroshi stood on the other side, his eyes widening as he registered the pirate's presence. "Dammit, so this is where you are after all!"

“Ikeda.” Ryoko’s brows furrowed in confusion. “What are you doing here?”

Then, as realisation sank in,

“Did Tenchi send you?”

“Sort of.” Hiroshi agreed, stepping into the apartment before the pirate could close the door, and offering her a smile. “He’s rather tied up with something of climactic proportions, but he’s worried about you. He said that you’d had a fight and he asked if I’d seen you — which I hadn’t, until now. But I told him I’d come see Sakura, and see what she knew. Obviously she knows a lot more than me, since here you are.”

“Yeah.” Ryoko frowned, then, “Sakura! It’s only Ikeda... what do you want me to do with him?”

“Ikeda?” Sakura emerged from the kitchen, a look of surprise on her face. “I thought you were far too busy playing with your new girlfriend to worry anything about any of us — you haven’t returned a single call of mine all week.”

“Girlfriend?” Hiroshi stared at her, then he laughed. “You mean Mayume, huh?”

“Unless you have more than one.” Sakura wiped her fingers absently on her apron. “Let me guess — you’re here because Tenchi sent you to find Ryoko, huh?”

“Something along those lines.” Hiroshi agreed cheerfully. “And I seem to have succeeded, so that’s all right.”

He fumbled in his pocket for his mobile phone, but before he could dial, a flash of amber lightning shot across the room, exploding it into shards of plastic shrapnel.

“Ryoko!” Sakura exclaimed. “What did I say about blowing things up in my apartment?!”

“That was my phone!” Hiroshi added. “Why the hell did you go and do that?”

“Because I don’t want to talk to Tenchi right now, through you or anyone else.” Ryoko put her hands on her hips. “This is no business of yours, Ikeda. Butt out of it, all right? If Tenchi has something to say to me, he could easily have come himself, after all. As it is...”

“You are one really really crazy lady when you’re ticked.” Hiroshi said ruefully, glancing at the charred remains of his phone. “But

dammit, Ryoko, that was a good phone you just totalled. It's not like I'm rich and can go out and buy ten more."

"I'll buy you a new phone." Ryoko sighed. "Just... I don't want to talk to Tenchi. Okay? Not through you, not through Sakura... not through anyone. Right now... I'm just confused and I don't know what I'm doing. But I'm not going home."

"What the hell happened?" Hiroshi's eyes widened. "Ryoko... are you serious? You and Tenchi are split up?"

"I don't know." Ryoko admitted softly. "Like I said, right now... I'm confused enough and I can't answer that. It's so complicated."

"Maybe you should spend your time focusing on your girl and leave Tenchi's alone, Ikeda." Sakura suggested, leaning up against the wall. "Or is Mayume-san all right with the idea of you running riot all over Osaka first thing in the morning on errands for your best friend?"

"Mayume went home yesterday afternoon." Hiroshi said evenly. "And don't glare at me like that, Sakura. I'm sorry if I didn't notice my friends were having some kind of emotional meltdown between them, but it's been a crazy few weeks. As it is I've only managed to catch up with Tenchi once. But Mayume's gone back home now. So you can quit the snapping."

"Gone... home?" Sakura blinked, and Hiroshi shrugged.

"Yeah." He agreed. "And she's not my girlfriend, before you make any more stupid remarks about that. Mayume's my cousin. She broke up with her fiancé a few weeks ago and I invited her down here to cheer her up a little. I figured taking her to graduation and stuff might snap her out of her depression... and I think it worked. She met an alien, after all — God knows what idea she's going home with, but she seemed more herself, when she left yesterday."

"Your... cousin?" Sakura repeated faintly, and despite herself, Ryoko managed a smile.

"Well, that makes more sense than you having attracted a girl like that on your own, Ikeda." She reflected. "Although I suppose there is no accounting for taste."

She cast Sakura a sidelong glance, and Sakura pinkened, shaking her head impatiently.

"This isn't solving anything." She said categorically. "Ryoko and Tenchi need some space and they need to sort out their own relationship mess, Hiroshi. If you understand enough about your

cousin's situation, you must know that.”

“Well, there's another reason Tenchi sent me out here. Another reason he didn't come himself, though he sounded rattled on the phone.” Hiroshi replied. “Apparently Washu-san had some kind of message — she's tried to relay it to that cat of yours, but Ryo Ohki is too busy sulking with Tenchi over upsetting you, and she's not really taking it in. The bottom line is, Ryoko, your mother's found something out about a weapon or something that's a threat to us here. Tenchi's worried about it, and about trying to stop it. This morning he's supposed to come here, to speak to Ishida-san at Kouken Industries to try and talk some sense into him before we all end up in a mess. That's why he's not here and I am. Because the Earth's in danger... and I think it's serious.”

“I see.” Ryoko's expression became grave, and she rubbed her temples as she digested this information. “And Washu thinks the threat is coming soon?”

“Yes.” Hiroshi agreed. “Tenchi didn't give me a lot of details — I don't think he wanted to scare me. But he seemed pretty scared. Freaked out, if you know what I mean. And he was worried about you. That if something happened... he didn't know for sure where you were.”

Ryoko sighed.

“Then maybe I should go home. Or at least, try and find him.” She said softly. “Whatever our personal situation, if the Earth is in danger... which it is, I know that. We've been trying to prevent that — that's how it all began, all of this. But this... I want it to be my home too. I don't want it to get messed up on my account. So I... I guess there's something I have to do about it. If I can... if I can.”

“So you're going home?” Sakura asked gently, and Ryoko hesitated.

“Right now I'm not sure what to say to him.” She admitted. “That's the truth. But...”

She trailed off, focusing her thoughts on the intermittent signals coming to her from the agitated, scatty cabbit, and her frown deepened.

“It's true enough. Ryo Ohki's thoughts are all over the place, but she does know something of it.” She said with a sigh. “Trouble is she's been too unsettled by my emotions this time around. She's worrying more about me and the message isn't getting through right. But whatever it is, it's big. And Washu... Washu doesn't know if she can

stop it.”

“Then they need your help.” Sakura said firmly, and Ryoko snorted.

“If Washu can’t stop it, what use am I?” She demanded. “Washu’s far more powerful than I am. Tenchi too. I’m just a pirate with a cocktail of random magics pumped into me. You both know that. You’ve both seen that.”

She sighed.

“Even so, though... I can’t just not do anything.” She acknowledged. “This is your planet and I’m helping to mess it up, as it stands. Whether it was Tenchi or me that Seiryō Tennan came after, it all amounts to the same. Without his meeting me, Tenchi would never have known he was Juraian, and nothing would ever have changed on the Earth. So... I guess in some ways it still is my fault. And so...”

Before she could finish her sentence, however, there was a loud crash, followed by a thud, and Sakura’s eyes widened as she cast a glance towards the living room.

“What the hell was that?” She whispered.

“Sounded like broken glass.” Hiroshi’s brows knitted together and he pushed her aside, reaching out for the door of the room with a hesitant, cautious glance around him. “Let me look. It sounded like a window, but... I’m not sure.”

“Someone broke my window?” Sakura demanded. “Ikeda, let me in there... and the agent said this neighbourhood wasn’t like that! I’ll be mad if he lied to me!”

“Stop it, both of you.” Ryoko shook her head, reaching across to yank the door open. “Whatever it was, it’s gone quiet. And I mightn’t be up to intergalactic warfare, but I’m certainly able to protect us all against broken glass.”

She stepped into the room, hovering a forcefield in front of her as she assessed the damage. As Hiroshi had said, one of the front windows that flanked the high street had shattered, glass scattered all over the carpet and, as she approached it, she saw the reason for the destruction. She frowned, bending to scoop up the would-be missile from the floor.

“A rock.” She murmured. “How original.”

“So someone really did try to break my window?” Sakura asked softly. Ryoko nodded.

“There’s something attached to it. Looks like a note, though it’s a bit shredded from the throw.” She agreed, holding it out, and Sakura took it tentatively, carefully unwrapping the ragged sheet of paper from the chunk of discarded brick.

She unfolded it, gazing at it with a startled look.

“Kura?” Hiroshi eyed her on concern. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” Sakura gathered herself, nodding as she held it out to him. “Here. It’s just... I’m angry. That’s all. That it’s got to this point. And my new apartment — I don’t need hassle like this.”

“*Those who shelter aliens are traitors to the Earth.*” Hiroshi read softly. “Dammit, Sakura... you’re a target now, too?”

“It must be because she was with me in the street, when Kenichi Ishida confronted me.” Ryoko looked troubled. “And perhaps someone saw me come here last night, too. Damn, and I wanted to avoid that... to avoid bringing either of you into this.”

She hurried to the window, gazing down at the street below with a growing sense of unease. People were milling around, much as any other morning, but they did not seem to be bent on their usual daily errands. Instead she could see slogans and placards, and she bit her lip, realising that the anti-alien fervour had begun to spill out into the streets of Osaka.

“Protests.” She murmured. “Against me. Against us. Against... everything.”

“They’re stupid.” Sakura grabbed the note back, tearing it in two. “There. Listen to me, Ryoko. What I said last night — I meant it. You’ve done nothing wrong and nothing to deserve any of this. They’re the idiots and if you think I — or Hiroshi, or Tenchi for that matter — are going to let them sway us, you better think again. You’re our friend — and I’m not succumbing to intimidation tactics on the part of fools who don’t understand!”

“Sakura’s right.” Hiroshi nodded his head. “We’re on your side, you know.”

“Maybe you are.” Ryoko bit her lip, as she made out both Kenichi and Kane in the crowds below. “But... that doesn’t really matter, when it comes to it. Mobs mass and they become hysterical. And then, if they’re not stopped, bad things happen. Violence happens. And you could be hurt. Both of you.”

She frowned, glancing at her hands.

“I’m not going to let that happen.” She added. “Tenchi can take care of himself, but neither of you can. And I’m not going to let them hurt you, even if it means using my powers and scaring the crap out of them. I’m not going to hurt anyone if I don’t have to — but it makes me mad when people threaten my friends.”

Light glimmered around her finger-tips as she spoke, and this time, Sakura did not chastise her for her flaring amber magic. Instead she nodded.

“Whatever is going on on the Earth as a whole, we’ve got a situation in Osaka that needs to be sorted out.” She said quietly. “But Ryoko — what are you planning to do?”

“I guess I’m going to give them what they want. The alien pirate.” Ryoko said simply.

“You’re not going to surrender to them?” Hiroshi demanded, and Ryoko snorted.

“Damn right I’m not.” She agreed. “But if they want to mess with me — or you — they’ll have to reassess their tactics. I’ll scare them off, don’t worry. You both just stay here.”

She flexed her fingers.

“I’ll be back as soon as I’ve given them something to think about.”

“No... don’t fight with them.” Sakura grabbed her by the arm, and Ryoko stared at her.

“But...?”

“This is your home. The Earthlings are your people now. This lot are just misled.” Sakura shook her head. “We want you to be able to stay here — with us, with Tenchi — we like having you around. So be careful. Okay? Don’t do anything to jeopardise that. Remember the nightclub — you were the hero, but they made you out to be the villain. Don’t let their ignorance pigeonhole you again... you are who you are and you have to make them accept you without using force to persuade them.”

“Without...” Ryoko hesitated, then, slowly, she nodded.

“I get it.” She murmured. “All right. But I’m still going out there. Someone has to. I’ll be all right, so promise me you’ll both stay here? I’ll be back as soon as I can be, but... if I’m not going to use my powers much, it might take a little time.”

Hiroshi and Sakura exchanged looks, then Hiroshi nodded.

“We’ll stay here.” He agreed. “Good luck, Ryoko... and remember, what Kura said is true. We’re on your side... don’t let us down, huh?”

Ryoko turned, casting him a startled look. Then she smiled.

“Understood loud and clear.” She said softly. “Finish breakfast, Sakura. I’m going to go work myself up an appetite.”

“So, you’ve finally decided to come to your senses.”

Kiyone opened her eyes, blinking at the sound of the voice as she tried to bring her surroundings into clearer focus. As she did so, she registered the cold eyes of the Galaxy Police Elite Agent staring down at her and she flinched back, aware in an instant as memories flooded through her.

“What have you done to me?” She demanded. “Where are we? What are you up to, you jerk — let me go!”

“Oh, you don’t like being tied up?” Nakabito leant back against the control panel of his ship, folding his arms across his chest as he eyed her coolly. “Well, we all have things we don’t like, Kiyone-san. I don’t like being spied on, or taken for a fool. It washes both ways... besides, your discomfort is temporary.”

He gestured out at the space-scape beyond the ship’s Perspex windows with a smile.

“I brought you up here so that you could get a good view of the finalisation of my plans.” He added. “Since you seem so fond of the Earth, I thought it only fair that you get to witness its final moments. But I had to take the precaution of tying you up. You’re a capable detective, and I know you’d take advantage if I allowed you to fly loose around my ship.”

“You’re insane.” Kiyone murmured. “You’re really going to use that death-weapon to destroy a planet full of people? I thought your father came from the Earth — don’t you care at all?”

Nakabito’s eyes hardened, and he slowly shook his head.

“My father abandoned my mother when I was a baby.” He said simply. “I’ve no use for the connection or the stigma it’s brought me over the years. Do you understand that, Detective? My mother was a good woman. She loved me, regardless. But he brought me into the world and then he left... why would I have any loyalties to him or the world that spawned him?”

He shrugged.

“I was born on Kanemitsu. Raised on Kanemitsu. Those are my origins.” He added. “Though it’s been useful for the first time to be able to claim Earth blood — if only to fool the stupid people on that planet that I was on their side.”

“The people on the Earth aren’t stupid. They’re just naïve — there’s a lot of things they’ve never been able to know.” Kiyone wriggled against her restraints, but it was to no avail — the knots were tightly fastened and she could barely shift even an inch. “And they don’t deserve to die. Surely even the population of Kanemitsu wouldn’t want you to go to these lengths — not to sacrifice a whole world even for their sake.”

“You don’t understand being under Jurai’s thumb.” Nakabito crouched in front of her, lifting her face to his with a thoughtful, curious look in his green eyes. “Or maybe I’m wrong. Perhaps you do. There are a few questions I’d like to ask you about that. It is, after all, true that Seiryō Tennan assaulted you and tried to end your life — yes?”

“Yes, though it’s none of your business.” Kiyone said flatly. Nakabito nodded.

“Yet you’re still working for him, aren’t you?” He murmured. “Even though he tried to kill you. What is this power that man has over people — over women? Why is it he can get away with so much, and still be successful and prominent? I don’t understand — I’ve never understood it. Why can a nobleman of Jurai treat the rest of existence like rubbish and still be looked up to and admired? Why would you help him, dammit? After what he did to you — *why* would you help him?”

A flicker of anger surfaced in his eyes as he finished his outburst, banging his fist down against the floor of the ship to emphasise his point. Kiyone flinched, aware of the speed with which Nakabito’s moods could turn, and she bit her lip.

“Seiryō is my friend.” She said softly. “And you’re wrong, Nakabito. You don’t understand because you don’t know what it really means to be a nobleman of Jurai.”

“I know what it means to be the constant butt of a Juraian’s jokes and taunts.” Nakabito said coldly. “And I know how they treat women. This one in particular. You are deceived, Kiyone Makibi, if you imagine this soulless goon feels anything for you. He has always been this way. He has taken women, used women, manipulated them

for his own ends. And then he has walked away, leaving them to bear the scars. It's you who doesn't understand, believe me. I have known Seiryō since we were eighteen years old. I understand better than you ever will what kind of a heart beats in that man's chest."

Kiyone frowned, taking a deep breath as she realised reasoning with this man would be practically impossible.

"Seiryō hurt you." She reflected. "He must have, for you to feel like this. But if it was that long ago — you should have moved on by now. Surely... nothing is worth holding onto a grudge for so many years."

"I won't ever forgive him." Nakabito said evenly, and for a moment he seemed rational again, though the calmness of his words and manner were belied by what he said. "He stole something very precious from me... something I could never regain. He ruined my future and my happiness and yet he walked away without even a care. Do you want to know how he treats women, Detective? I could tell you a few things about that. You might be deceived by his status and his dubious charisma, but do you really know him? Probably not."

He stood, moving across towards the ship's control panel as if gathering his thoughts.

"I was once engaged to be married." He said softly, and despite her predicament, the genuine anguish in the man's tones made Kiyone's heart clench in unexpected sympathy for her opponent's pain. "She was Seniwān — she was called Yuriko, and she was... she was the most special person to me. She accepted me... for everything that I was."

He frowned, clenching and unclenching his fists as he fought to bring his unsteady emotions under control.

"We had our disputes, sometimes." He admitted. "But they were never serious. At least, I didn't think so. But during one of them, she happened to meet Tennan. I don't know... I don't understand what witchcraft he used on her. But nothing was the same after that. He used her — for maybe one week, two weeks she was constantly by his side, on his arm, even in his bed, God dammit! And then he tossed her aside like she was nothing. And moved on to the next."

Kiyone swallowed hard, wanting to defend Seiryō's actions but not being able to find anything coherent to say in support of her friend.

"Yuriko fell in love with him, somehow." Nakabito whispered. "I don't pretend to know how or why — what spell he cast to make her so. But it changed everything. She... she wouldn't look at me the

same. Talk to me. She told me that she loved him — no matter what he did, that she'd fallen for him and that she no longer could marry me. She tried to get over it, but she never could. She left the Academy. She went home to Seniwa. And even though I went after her... it wasn't me she wanted. Not any more. Such a brief affair... I could have forgiven it. Would have. But she... he... there was no going back. And then..."

He faltered, and Kiyone detected the uneven note in his voice as he struggled with the demons of the past.

"She took a job on Seniwa, in one of their computer companies." He murmured. "She wanted to make a new start away from the Galaxy Police. But... one day there was a fire — wiring damage or something like that, they said. And she... she could have escaped it, but she didn't. She used her Police training to help people get out — and she died doing so."

He wheeled around, anger flaring in his eyes again and Kiyone tensed, almost expecting him to strike her.

"If not for him, we would have been together at the Academy when that fire broke out!" He exclaimed. "If not for him, she'd still be alive! All her dreams, all her hopes... everything was lost... all because of him!"

His eyes narrowed as he paced towards her, roughly cupping her chin in his hands as he forced her to meet his gaze.

"Do you still want to defend him now, Detective?" He demanded softly. "Now you know what he is... do you still want to tell me I don't understand?"

"He was a damn idiot." Kiyone said frankly, hurriedly gathering the shreds of her composure as she met his accusing, demanding eyes with as calm a gaze as she could muster. "He did stupid, selfish things that I can't even begin to defend. That's not the issue here — you seem to be confused. Are you trying to free Kanemitsu, or take revenge on a man who jilted your lover? Because I can sympathise with the scorned fiancé routine. I can't, however, sympathise with you wanting to blow up a rock full of innocent people."

Nakabito looked startled for a moment. Then he frowned.

"The two are connected." He said at length. "Jurai must be seen to take the blame for the breach of space law. Seiryō is the obvious candidate, based on the events of a year and a half ago when he so kindly created a motive for suspicion by attacking a nightclub on the

Earth. This is both for revenge and for my people's sake. And it isn't just Seiryō I hate. It's all of Jurai, too."

His gaze darkened.

"You know my mother always believed in Kanemitsu's freedom." He added slowly. "She was a victim — murdered on the Sumire when she tried to go to negotiate peace with that tinpot Emperor Azusa. Seiryō is merely a manifestation of the Juraian ideal — the attitude of taking and destroying that permeates that planet. As I said, the two fit together nicely."

"The people on the Sumire were killed by a demon called Yugi Kuroda." Kiyone said bluntly, and Nakabito laughed.

"Smokescreen." He said, flicking his hands dismissively. "Who really believes in demons, anyway?"

"Yugi Kuroda was a real person." Kiyone snapped back. "I know all about her, because she stalked me and tried to kill me when I investigated the murders of Seniwans and Galaxy Police Agents that had nothing to do with Kanemitsu or their bid for independence. The Sumire was in the wrong place at the wrong time — that's all. The people aboard it were killed to protect Yugi's own ends, not to forward Azusa-heika's ambitions of keeping control over Kanemitsu. Yugi Kuroda came to kill Princess Sasami. She didn't care about your planet, or who she killed to get to her main objective."

"What would you know about it? You're just a Regular Division Detective. Nothing more."

"Wrong." Kiyone's eyes darkened. "I was involved in cracking and solving the Sumire case. As I said, Yugi Kuroda almost killed me because of it, but I'm not so easy to kill as all of that. She wasn't a demon — not a true demon composed of evil thoughts and wishes. She was a person turned to evil so much that she couldn't turn back. That's why she's referred to as a 'demon' — because she let her hate overwhelm her. Just like you have. You're a demon too, Nakabito! You're as bad as the one who killed your mother, and she'd be ashamed if she could see you now. Attacking a planet that can't defend itself... is that really the kind of son she wanted to raise?"

Nakabito eyed her for a moment, then he smiled, and Kiyone's heart sank in her chest as she realised her gambit had failed.

"You are well acquainted with Jurai." He murmured. "So I was right. You are *their* spy. It's not just Tennan, but let me see... maybe his mistress too? The Princess Sasami herself? I see. You are tied right

up with their Royal Family, aren't you? I should have discovered that sooner. No wonder you'll forgive Seiryō's indiscretion against you. You're in the power and pay of the Princess they all revere."

"I already told you I'm not Juraian." Kiyone shook her head impatiently. "And nobody buys my justice. I do what I swore to do, that's all. And that includes protecting people on planets like the Earth. Kanemitsu might or might not deserve their freedom — I don't really know or care about that. But I do care that you're willing to slaughter billions of innocents to achieve it. You think Azusa-sama is a killer — but what right have you got to criticise him, when you're willing to do this?"

"And what about the destruction of Kihaku?"

"Kihaku was a dead planet, and Jurai didn't destroy it." Kiyone snapped back. "It was destroyed by its own people — don't you know anything at all?"

She shook her head.

"Dammit, for an Elite, you really do have a screwy idea of evidence."

"The Kii are dead, and even when they lived they didn't have technology to blow up a planet." Nakabito said cuttingly. "I am better informed than you think, Kiyone. Only a planet such as Jurai could create a weapon strong enough to send debris so far and wide across space."

"Do you really think so?" Kiyone murmured, and Nakabito faltered, his eyes widening as he stared at her anew. He muttered a curse, then,

"Professor *Hakubi*? Dammit... is *she* in Jurai's pay too?"

"Washu's never been in anyone's pay except her own." Kiyone said frankly. "But you really are a fool. Washu destroyed Kihaku because she had to — a lot of people would have suffered, including your own, if she had not. The world was dead anyway... only her sister still lived there, and she survived the explosion, albeit with impairments to her mind. *Washu* blew up Kihaku, you idiot. Azusa-heika had nothing to do with it. Just like the Sumire — your paranoia is connecting everything to Jurai and you're bending facts to fit opinions, not the other way about!"

Nakabito's brow furrowed, and he moved back to the ship's dashboard, running his gaze over the instructions on the navigation monitor.

“Then I suppose, when the Earth is destroyed, there’ll be no problem if the Professor dies in the explosion too.” He murmured. “Perhaps it will be fitting. Who knows... either way, one who has weaponry of that nature should probably be stopped. I might yet find there are many other benefits to this little plan that I hadn’t begun to realise.”

He turned, smiling at her.

“I’m going to speak to the Earth now, and warn them of an impending attack from Juraian antagonists.” He added conversationally. “If you scream or make any kind of noise, I’ll make sure you regret it. You can die slowly or quickly, and the former is not something you want to try... take it from me.”

“What if I don’t care if you kill me?” Kiyone demanded, and Nakabito’s smile widened.

“You’re fond of the Kuramitsu family, I know that.” He said softly. “You might find that it’s your partner’s life you pay with as well as your own.”

“Mihoshi is safe... you can’t bluff me!”

“It’s true, at the moment, she is quite safe on Seniwa.” Nakabito nodded. “But she must return to Headquarters sooner or later. I could keep her out of it, Kiyone — your life is already forfeit, but hers might not be, if you cooperate. Otherwise I’ll be forced to summon her to my office to tell her first hand exactly what fate befell her partner in space... do you understand?”

Kiyone bit her lip, but slowly she nodded.

“Fine.” She snapped. “I’ll be quiet. Mihoshi knows none of this anyway — leave her out of it.”

“Then we have a deal.” Nakabito nodded approvingly. “Good. I’m glad you still have some of your sense, Detective.”

As he turned his attention to the communicator, Kiyone’s gaze roved around the drive room, but it was soon apparent that the Elite had taken no chances and there was absolutely nothing within her reach that might set her free from her expertly tied bonds. She bit her lip, wishing that she’d been able to leave a message with Imaguchi and Takamura, but they had said themselves that her involvement was at an end, and she doubted very much that they’d even notice she was gone until it was too late.

“Another officer killed in the line of duty.” She whispered. “But

dammit, what can I do? Is he really going to make me sit here and watch the Earth explode? Is he *really* going to make me watch my friends die?"

"Well?"

Imaguchi set a mug of tea down beside the computer console, casting his companion an impatient look as he took a sip of his own drink.

"Can you break it? Do you know what it says?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd shut up and let me concentrate." Seiryō said darkly. "This isn't a pleasure mission, you know — I told you to come aboard the Unko, not make yourself at home. Who authorised you to make tea?"

"Ryou thought you might need it. You've been staring at that screen like it's going to bite you for almost an hour." Imaguchi returned neatly. "Don't give me the lip, Seiryō — we've been trying to cover your back with scant little help from your planet or anyone else. At least give us some credit for getting this far."

Seiryō's eyes narrowed, and he pushed back his seat, glaring up at his old friend as he did so.

"You put Kiyone's life in danger." He said quietly. "In itself, that is both irresponsible and unforgivable. She is not an Elite Agent, and even with the help I have given her she lacks the requisite knowledge and training for the kind of mission you described. Getting this documentation was not worth the potential loss of her life... of course I'm going to give you lip, as you put it."

Imaguchi's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"What is this girl to you, Seiryō?" He asked softly.

"My friend." Seiryō said coldly. "Not that that's any concern of yours. And you are breaking my concentration. The cipher is crude and rough indeed — it disobeys many of the rules of encoding and it is clumsy. I believe the Unko and I can break it, but not with you asking stupid questions every few minutes. Shut up and let me concentrate."

Imaguchi pursed his lips, standing back as he folded his arms across his chest, and Seiryō turned his attention back to the screen, carefully highlighting and shifting blocks of nonsensical text into a new order as he worked methodically through the secured documents, looking for

the key to unlock the pattern.

“It’s based on Kanemitsu dialogue.” He said at length. “But it’s rough enough for me to pierce it. I don’t speak Kanemitsu’s native dialect myself, but I was taught familiarity with the characters, since some people do use them randomly in encoding. I think I have the core of the code, but it remains to be seen whether the formula will apply to all of these documents you have on this disk. As I said, it’s crude. The cipher doesn’t follow a set pattern and is poorly constructed. That is, in effect, the only reason it is so hard to break. It certainly isn’t a matter of intellectual sophistication.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re as on the ball as you ever are with things like this.” Imaguchi reflected. “Hey, Ryou! Seiryō thinks he’s found a way through... coming to see what we’ve got so far?”

“Right with you.” Takamura emerged from the Unko’s living quarters, coming to stand behind the screen. “What’s doing, then? Do we have a clue where Nakabito’s gone?”

“I would have thought the logical answer to that question would be Planet Earth.” Seiryō raised an impassive gaze to his companion. “Since you said he intends to blow it up.”

“We’d like to intercept him before that, if we can.” Imaguchi said. “The truth is, Seiryō, that if he and his brother are colluding, the weapon must be hidden somewhere. And if we nail Nakabito at the Earth, it’s all fine and dandy, but we still won’t have a scrap on Akihiro. And if we’re right, and he’s really constructed some kind of super weapon based on stolen Juraian designs, he could easily build another.”

“There’s no way Nakabito could carry such a thing on his ship at Headquarters without alerting suspicion.” Takamura added. “He’d need to obtain it — to rendezvous with Akihiro somewhere. We don’t have that information. But if we did, we might be able to stop all of this before it reaches the Solar System. There’s limited security there as it is, and no backup.”

“I see.” Seiryō leant back in his seat, folding his hands in his lap. “I suppose that does make sense.”

“And of course, the sooner we track them down, the better our chances of rescuing Kiyone.” Imaguchi admitted. “If the worst comes to the worst, Seiryō, we’ll have to take decisive action against the Inazuma. And that might mean destroying it. If Kiyone is on board...”

“You will not do anything of the sort, if Kiyone is still on board.”

Seiryō interrupted, holding up his hands. “Do you understand me? I won’t stand for it. You won’t sacrifice her in the name of justice.”

“We don’t intend to.” Takamura assured him. “Which is why engaging his ship before we get to that point... is important.”

“Agreed.” Seiryō chewed on his lip, surveying the screen as he loaded one of the encoded documents. “Well. Now I think I have the cipher formula, let’s see what the Unko makes of this.”

“Go for it.” Imaguchi nodded. “If we’re right, this disk has information on Akihiro’s weapon, on Nakabito’s plans and on their whereabouts. Evidence enough to put them both in Galactic prison for the rest of their lives under the Intergalactic Terrorism Act. Anything like that would be more than welcome, Seiryō.”

“How about a treasure hunt?” Seiryō asked softly.

“A what?” Takamura looked confused, and Seiryō flicked a finger at the screen.

“This document is an irrelevance.” He responded. “It’s encoded to appear as though it is, but really there is nothing in the information that is of import or use. However, in itself, it serves another purpose. It’s what’s called a gateway file — do you remember such things from your own encryption training?”

“Vaguely, although I don’t think we went into it a lot.” Takamura admitted. “I was too busy focusing on forensic evidence to be too concerned with the extra complexities of encryption.”

“Isn’t a gateway file a foil to protect something more secure within?” Imaguchi frowned. Seiryō nodded.

“Exactly that.” He murmured. “A door with a lock... and the Unko has a very good skeleton key for matters such as this.”

He keyed in a combination, and little by little the document dispersed into fragments on the screen, revealing a dark blue space map beneath. Takamura let out an exclamation, and Imaguchi cursed, peering closer at the diagram that now spread out before them.

“This is sector three eight six.” He murmured. “Close enough to Kanemitsu space to be convenient.”

“And that red dot must be Akihiro’s hideout.” Takamura pointed. “There’s no planet at that proximity to any of the surrounding locations for it to be anything else.”

“Looks like some kind abandoned space station, from the readout.”

Imaguchi drummed his fingers against the desk absently. “Seiryō, any chance of dragging up more data?”

“Not from the map, but maybe from the additional files.” Seiryō replied grimly. “We could waste all our time analysing the kind of place it is. You can do so, if you like... but I have enough information now to go and follow Nakabito’s trail. I’ll trust the Unko is suitably armed for conflict... we don’t have the luxury of hours to properly take this to pieces.”

“The Unko won’t stand a chance if it encounters Nakabito’s laser.” Takamura warned. “If we’re right about this weapon.”

“Prepared or otherwise, that is still the case.” Seiryō said frankly. “But if Nakabito’s still the wily, sneaky idiot he always used to be, he won’t use such a weapon on me. Not even if he still hates me as much as he ever did. He won’t want to alert anyone to the magnitude of his arsenal until it’s too late to stop him. He will save it for use against the Earth. And I don’t think we should let him get there.”

“Seiryō’s right.” Imaguchi nodded. “We have to go after him, information or not.”

“Then let’s do so.” Seiryō got to his feet, moving across the floor to the main drive console and keying the coordinates of the hidden base into the ship’s navigation system. The Unko whirled and flashed lights across its dashboard as it accepted its master’s instruction, and Seiryō gritted his teeth.

“The Unko is faster than either of your ships.” He said quietly, turning to face his friends. “So if you don’t mind, this is where I give you a lift.”

“No complaints here.” Imaguchi leant up against the wall. “I’m sure that, when they realise the situation, Headquarters will overlook us going into conflict on an unauthorised vessel.”

“In the company of a blacklisted officer.” Takamura said dryly, and Seiryō offered him a rueful glance.

“Indeed.” He murmured. “But desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“You are fond of the girl, aren’t you?” Imaguchi asked bluntly and Seiryō started, eying the Seniwan warily.

“Pardon me?”

“Kiyone.” Imaguchi spread his hands. “You seem as concerned — or more so — about her safety than you do the Earth’s.”

“Kiyone is my friend.” Seiryō turned his attention back to the dashboard as he primed his craft to leave Jurai’s atmosphere and enter into open space. “And I am concerned, obviously, about the Earth. I have friends there too.”

“Professor Hakubi?”

“Indeed.” Seiryō agreed. “You do seem to know a lot about my current life, considering that we have not been in contact for over a year. I did not realise I was so interesting a study.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Imaguchi snorted. “Ryou and I have been doing our best to keep you out of trouble, that’s all. Nothing more.”

“Out of trouble?” Seiryō arched an eyebrow. “Would you mind explaining exactly what you mean? It seems a lot of people have been involved in protecting me from something of late, and I’d appreciate knowing exactly what’s going on.”

“It began with an investigation into breaches of space law.” Takamura sighed. “And it got progressively more sinister. Are you aware that a Kanemitsu extremist was caught on Jurai spying on information relating to your hearing before the Emperor, a year and a half ago?”

“A spy?” Seiryō stared. “No. I knew nothing of this. And what could he want with such information? That unfortunate incident is closed.”

“Wrong.” Imaguchi shook his head. “Now look, Seiryō. Ryou and I know you. You’re an arrogant fool and sometimes you overstep the line. But you’re not reckless enough to charge into a protected planet in order to set random fires. We’ve seen the tape of the hearing, because at that time, Jurai decided to cooperate with us. You barely spoke a word, which indicates there’s a lot more to the story than the Emperor knows. And there were people among the Galaxy Police — Nakabito among them — who wanted to charge you for your crime against the Earth. Now that the Earth is in a position to testify against you.”

Seiryō’s eyes narrowed.

“And this will happen, now?” He asked evenly.

“No.” Takamura said with a shrug. “Because Hideki and I have so far blocked the motion. We’ve been driving Jurai crazy with our constant demands to speak to you, and they’ve been doing the same for us by keeping you away. We knew you didn’t know we’d been about. Fortunately I managed to speak to your sister — and the girl, Tokimi — and certainly Tokimi’s evidence would be enough to acquit

you of malice against the Earth. Of that I'm quite sure."

"You interrogated Tokimi?" Rage flared in Seiryō's expression. "Behind my back?"

"I'm sorry." Takamura looked guilty. "But she wanted to help you. She seems very fond of you, Seiryō."

"I don't want her being reminded of things that happened then." Seiryō said darkly. "She's been through enough without your prying into her memories. The poor girl was a victim as much as me — more, in fact, in some ways. I won't have her hurt on my account — you had no right to do that. Not even to help me — you had no right."

"You care about her too." Imaguchi's eyes widened. "Dammit, Seiryō, who *are* you?"

"What kind of a stupid question is that?" Seiryō looked confused. "Seiryō Tennan, you idiot. Who else would I be?"

"What Hide means is that neither of us have ever seen you so openly display your concern for someone before." Takamura remarked. "First Kiyone. Now Tokimi. It's not like you."

Seiryō was silent for a moment. Then he sighed.

"These days it is." He murmured. "Things have changed."

"That might be an understatement." Imaguchi reflected, and Seiryō nodded.

"Tokimi's Kii magic has an irreversable effect on anyone it touches." He said quietly. "There's no punishment even Headquarters could have found for me which would have been more intense than the after effects of being infused with such an incantation. That is why the Emperor of Jurai was — seemingly — so lenient on me in that case. And why he has forgiven me my indiscretions and allowed me position on Jurai. He knows that I have already served a far more demanding sentence than any justice he could mete out. He is a wise man... and he has no reason to question my loyalty, not now. I am not the boy you went to school with or the Agent you once worked with. Not any more. I am... different. The same but... different."

"I don't pretend I understand that." Imaguchi admitted. "But it's refreshing to have you bothered about more than your own family's position. Kiyone's not noble-born, is she?"

"No, I don't believe so." Seiryō shook his head. "But we are friends, nonetheless."

“Even though you tried to kill her?”

Pain flashed across Seiryō’s expression, and he shook his head again.

“It was another me that did that.” He murmured. “With her in such danger now... please do not remind me of that. I have moved past it, but in some ways I won’t ever forgive myself for it. And right now I would prefer to remain focused on what the task at hand is.”

Takamura’s eyes widened.

“You’re in love with her.” He murmured, and Seiryō sent him a stricken look as Imaguchi, who had been sipping his tea choked, almost spitting the greenish liquid all over the dashboard. Takamura frowned, nodding his head.

“You *are*.” He decided. “Seiryō...”

“Now we’ve stepped into the world of the surreal.” Imaguchi recovered himself, shaking his head as he hurriedly set his mug down. “Changed or not, I won’t believe Lord Tennan of Jurai would lose his heart so easily to a Regular Division detective of insignificant birth. Not our Seiryō. What about the Tennan bloodline? It’s beyond the bounds of belief.”

“Shut up, the pair of you.” Seiryō snapped. “I didn’t come with you so you could bait me.”

“Dammit.” Imaguchi faltered. “Ryou... is *right*?”

“I said shut up!” Seiryō exclaimed, pushing him aside as he stalked towards the door of the drive room. “Shut up, the both of you! Focus on why we’re even here, will you, and leave me alone!”

“Seiryō...” Takamura put a hand out to stop him from leaving, and something in the man’s tones made the indignant noble falter. He turned to face his companion defiantly, and slowly Takamura shook his head.

“I’m sorry we put her in such danger.” He said quietly. “If we’d understood the nature of your connection... we would have been... more aware.”

At this evident contrition, Seiryō felt his temper drain out of him and he sighed, dropping back against the wall of the drive room as he rubbed his temples.

“There is no connection. We are friends.” He said quietly. “Whatever else you may or may not think, there is nothing in our

relationship beyond that. But...”

“But you *do* love her.” Imaguchi looked nonplussed. “You actually do, don’t you? Not as a trinket or something to pass the time — but you genuinely care for this girl.”

“I won’t deny it.” Seiryō said heavily. “And I will save her, if I at all can. After all, somewhere along the line all this has been my fault. My stupidity almost cost her her life once. I will not let it happen a second time. Even if it kills me, I won’t let Nakabito hurt her.”

He clenched his fists, closing his eyes as he focused his composure and his emotions.

“I won’t lose someone else I love.” He muttered. “Not so soon as this... I *won’t!*”

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

“Well, this looks like the sort of place a villain would hide out, that’s for sure.”

Imaguchi leant up against the perspex of the Unko’s front observation panel, peering out critically into the blackness beyond as they approached the centre of the charted territory.

“Dark and deserted — a wasteland of old experimental space stations. It’s almost Sargasso in its ambience — I can see why Akihiro’s been using this sector for his dirty work. Noone would come here by choice, and if anyone found out he was, he could simply claim he was using it as a testing base for his legitimate projects. Which, come to think of it, he probably already does. I can’t believe we didn’t realise that before... I need to study my space maps more clearly before I launch into a mission, clearly.”

“You think he’s here?” Takamura cast his colleague a doubtful glance. “I don’t see any sign of the Inazuma. Maybe we’re too late... maybe they’re already gone.”

“That’s so pessimistic.” Imaguchi scolded. “At least wait until Seiryō’s wonder-ship tells us he’s gone before you get all gloomy about it.”

“Ryousuke is right, however.” Seiryō leant in the doorway of the chamber, shaking his head. “The Inazuma was here, I’ve tracked its vapour trail. But it’s left... and probably about an hour ago.”

“Which means that the brothers have probably rendezvoused here.” Takamura’s brows knitted together. “And this weapon that we’re trying to get rid of is likely now aboard that ship... not here at all.”

“I’d concur.” Seiryō agreed quietly. “Nakabito is ahead of us — it took too long to break his cipher.”

He clenched his fists, banging them against the wall in a fit of sudden temper.

“Damn that man!” He exclaimed. “Is he going to make billions of people suffer just because he hates me that much?”

“I imagine so.” Imaguchi grimaced. “I’ve always thought he was a

touch on the unbalanced side. The outwardly rational, reasonable ones often are. They're the ones who have things to hide — noone is that even all of the time. And we know from past experience that Nakabito has one hell of a grudge-holding talent. I'd say you're on the nail, Seiryō."

"I don't think you're helping, Hide." Takamura scolded, casting Seiryō a keen glance. "Seiryō — if Akihiro is still here, we need to apprehend him. And I can't see that, if the Inazuma left so recently, he will have got far from here. If he's left the station at all. Considering the nature of his work, we need to get in there and arrest him."

"And what about Kiyone and the Earth?" Seiryō demanded. "Aren't they a little more important right at the moment?"

"Depends on what these two brothers have planned out." Imaguchi's eyes narrowed. "Listen, Tennan — your hormones might be dictating your actions right now, but they're not dictating ours. We don't know where the Inazuma is right now — and in any case, the Unko is a faster ship than it is, we both know that. But we can't let Akihiro run loose... he might even be a useful bargaining chip in persuading Nakabito against attacking the Earth."

"My hormones have nothing to do with this." Seiryō said coldly, shaking his head. "Give me some credit for tactics. I trained just as much as you did. I've solved as many cases as you, and I've received awards for good service as much as you both have. Don't act superior, just because you still wear the uniform. As Sasami-sama's advisor, I use my training a lot more than you realise. And I don't care about Akihiro. I care about stopping the Inazuma. Even if it's true that the Unko is faster than Nakabito's ship, the longer we sit here, the more distance he has. If there is to be a conflict, do you want it to occur in the Earth's orbit? Such a situation would be ideal for noone!"

"He does have a point." Takamura grimaced. "But what can we do? For all we know, Akihiro has a network of weaponry stashed away all around this sector. If we can take him by surprise..."

"You think a man of that calibre hasn't noticed the Unko zipping around?" Imaguchi demanded. Takamura shrugged.

"I imagine he's lying low." He said wisely. "Because this sector is essentially a dead section of space. If he was to attack us, he'd give away his position. He's hoping we're passing through."

"And we are." Seiryō said quietly. "I'm not playing hide and seek with Nakabito's brother when he's not our main target."

“Seiryō...”

“If you want him so much, you go after him.” Seiryō interrupted, shaking his head. “The Unko has an emergency transport pod. You take that and go play chase with Akihiro around the wreckage. I’m going after the Inazuma and Kiyone — and dammit, I’m going to catch him.”

The two agents exchanged looks, then Takamura sighed.

“Are you sure you want to take him on alone?” He asked softly. Seiryō’s eyes hardened, and he nodded his head.

“Yes.” He said evenly. “This is my fight, after all. It’s always been my fight, where he’s concerned. And this time I’m going to make sure he understands that I’m not a man to be messed with.”

“Well, don’t do anything rash.” Imaguchi dropped a hand down on his companion’s shoulder. “Remember, you’re not in uniform now. And we’ve not worked as hard as we have to clear your name for you to mess it all up again by breaching space codes left right and centre. Even if you are in love with the girl — use some of that cool Tennan sense I know you still have somewhere in there. Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“So long as Kiyone is all right, I won’t have any regrets.” Was Seiryō’s even response. “Well? You’re wasting time. I’m going to reset the Unko’s course... so if you want to go after Akihiro, you’d better board that pod before I change direction.”

“I suppose he’s right.” Takamura sighed. “Okay. Take care, Seiryō... seriously, do as Hide said. We both know what kind of an agent you were... prove you still are, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.” A faint smile flickered at the edge of Seiryō’s lips, and he nodded. “And I’ll report to you both once it’s over — providing the three of us remain alive, of course.”

“Of course.” Wry humour touched Imaguchi’s expression. “That makes me think of old times, you know... you always were such an optimist, whenever we coopted you into our cases. I guess not everything changes.”

“I’m a realist.” Seiryō turned his gaze back towards space. “Go on, both of you. I already told you — I’m not hanging around.”

He flicked a switch, gesturing to the passageway that opened up in the left wall.

“Follow that through.” He added. “You’ll find the pod’s door is

released and you can enter. Try not to wreck it too much if you can help it — Suki gets twitchy when I go back to Jurai with damaged equipment.”

“Fine.” Takamura nodded. “Come on, Hide. Let’s do as he says. We can overpower Akihiro, I’m sure, and take him into custody.”

“And we’ll have to trust the rest to you.” Imaguchi glanced at Seiryō, then nodded, raising his hand in a mock-salute. “All right, Agent Tennan. We’ll speak to you on completion of the mission.”

Seiryō glanced at him for a moment, then he smiled ruefully, echoing the gesture with a salute of his own.

“Understood, Agent Imaguchi.” He murmured. “Good luck.”

“You’re the one who needs the luck.” Takamura said frankly. “If you have to blow up the Inazuma, we’ll do our best to cover for you — but above all, Seiryō, make sure you stop him from blowing up the Earth.”

Seiryō nodded soberly.

“I will.” He murmured. “On my reputation as a former agent of the Galaxy Police, I guarantee it.”

“This entire city is going crazy.”

As Washu materialised the group of would be Earth-rescuers in a quiet back-alley of Osaka’s main centre, her brows knitted together in consternation as she glanced around her. Despite the remote nature of the location, she could hear the sounds of shouting and the occasional crash of glass, and she bit her lip as for a second a flash of maternal instinct hoped that Ryoko was somewhere safe.

“No kidding.” Tenchi put his hand to his head as if in an attempt to stop his surroundings swirling, offering her an apprehensive glance. “If Ryoko is here, what the hell have these people done to her?”

“Ryoko can take care of herself.” Yume said quietly. “Or at least, she has the ability to. And that’s not why we’re here... Tenchi, focus. This is about more than just Ryoko.”

“Yume’s right.” At the droid’s words, Washu pushed her own concerns to the back of her mind, nodding her head. “And I think this is where we part ways. Yume-chan, I don’t think that Ishida-san needs to see you in my company — not at the moment. You’ve developed a rapport with Kenichi and Kane, so perhaps you’ll have a better impact

on them at street level if you hunt them down and try and shake some sense into them. Tenchi and I will handle this.”

“All right.” Yume nodded her head, even as she shimmered her form into the youthful likeness of the dead scientist. “I’ll see what I can do — although I’m not sure it will be much.”

“Us either, but in the face of certain danger, what else can we do?” Washu shrugged helplessly. “I don’t even know if talking to Ishida will have any effect... but dammit, we’re running out of options.”

“Then I’ll see you both later.” Yume agreed grimly. “Good luck.”

“Good luck, she says.” As the droid hazed out of view, Tenchi sighed, casting his companion a doubtful look. “Do you think we’ll even see Yume again at this rate? If they really are going to blow up the Earth — Washu, if even your science can’t stop this... what good is it going to do talking to Seguru Ishida?”

“Possibly, none.” Washu acknowledged. “But that doesn’t mean we’re not going to try. Pull yourself together, Tenchi... you’re distracted far too much by the fight with Ryoko and it’s clouding your judgement.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Tenchi agreed sadly. He raised his gaze to the sky, and Washu could tell what he was thinking. She sighed, reaching out to take him by the arm.

“Come on.” She murmured. “Its not over yet. And we’re not completely alone in this. Remember, Kiyone and her Galaxy Police friends are also working on it from their end. It might yet be that they stop this Nakabito before he can do anything... but even if the Earth survives, we have to do something about the paranoia of the people.”

She led him out of the alley and along the main street, dodging sharply as a car wheeled along the edge of the pavement, speeding along at several times the speed limit. There seemed to be people in every corner she looked, and even from there she could make out various anti-alien slogans printed crudely across tee-shirts and banners. She cursed under her breath, feeling faintly claustrophobic as for a moment she was reminded of moments in her past.

“But at the moment, I’m safe.” She told herself inwardly. “They don’t know who I am, this growing mob of people, and so long as we get to Kouken without anyone realising... pull yourself together, Washu! You’ve spent a lifetime being hated or feared by one people or another. Don’t let a bunch of hysterical earthlings distract you!”

“There are a lot of people around.” Tenchi murmured, as they

reached the front entrance of the Kouken building, realising as they did so that a crowd of people had begun to gather here as well. "I don't think I've ever seen Osaka quite like this before. It's like everyone who ever had a grudge against the alien idea just came out of the shadows... as if someone sent them a message and..."

"Maybe they did." Washu said grimly. "The internet is a dangerous thing in the wrong hands, even as primitive as it is on the Earth. Come on, Tenchi. Before it's impossible to get through. We're not looking to make small talk with demonstrators. We're here to speak to the bigwig himself... focus."

"I'm focused." Tenchi assured her, as somehow she managed to inch them through the swirling throng of bodies, and into the foyer of one of Osaka's most prestigious business bases. In contrast to the mayhem growing outside, the front lobby seemed quiet and strangely empty, and Washu frowned, her brow furrowing as she glanced around her.

"I guess that his staff are out on parade." She murmured. "Well, okay then. We'll take the lift up and hope noone decides to stop us."

"Can't we just teleport?" Tenchi demanded, as the scientist pulled him roughly across the floor, phasing him through the thick steel doors and into the lift shaft. He opened his mouth to protest at the sudden shifting of his molecules, but all words died in his throat as he realised there was no car beyond the doors, and that they were, in fact, several feet above the metal contraption that, hooked by wires and cables, was slowly moving towards them.

"Dammit, Washu!" He exclaimed, and Washu shrugged, her grip on her companion tightening as she lifted them both upwards.

"Short cut. Don't argue." She said briskly. "Don't be a baby, Tenchi. I'm not going to drop you — I can fly too, or did you forget that?"

"But the thing... it's coming up!" Tenchi protested, and Washu nodded.

"So are we." She said softly. "Hold on tight and trust me. We're almost there."

"Even teleporting would be better than this!" Tenchi muttered, though he did as he was bidden, and Washu sent him a rueful glance, phasing him through the upper level doors and onto the relative safety of the long, narrow landing.

"It would, but I've never been inside Ishida-san's office before." She admitted. Tenchi's eyes widened as he digested this.

“What?” He demanded. “Then how do you know where we’re going?”

“Because I hacked plans of the building last night, when it became obvious what kind of a day trip we were taking this morning.” Washu said briefly. “Stop complaining and just come on, will you? I told you. Have a little faith.”

“That’s fine for you to say.” Tenchi rubbed his temples. “I’m not built to be phased and shifted around like that.”

“No, but desperate times call for desperate measures.” Washu glanced around her, scanning the signs on the walls, then nodding her head. “All right. It’s this way. Try not to look too conspicuous, okay?”

“You want me to look inconspicuous? When you just flew up a lift shaft?” Tenchi demanded.

“Well, I think it highly unlikely that, by now, Ishida-san doesn’t know who you are.” Washu said quietly. “And that’s why I don’t want to risk talking to any of his staff if we can prevent it. I don’t want anyone to stop us getting to Ishida’s office. It’s a really really slim hope... but it’s all we have, so we can’t let anything get in our way.”

She led them around the next corner, counting doors in her head until she reached the end, then nodded.

“Through here is the hallway leading to his suite of offices.” She murmured. “More phasing, I’m afraid, Tenchi. Hang on, okay? I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

“I damn well hope he’s here, after all this.” Tenchi murmured, and Washu nodded.

“Me too.” She admitted glibly. “But I think he will be. He’s the Master of Operations here on the Earth, after all. He’s the one who’s been liasing with the troublemakers in space.”

She frowned, closing her eyes as she focused her magic to bring them safely through the first door, and then the next as at length they found themselves in a wide, spacious office, well appointed and positioned with a clear view over the growing mayhem in the city below.

“It’s worse than I thought.” Washu whispered, as she surveyed the crowds outside. “This has been going on longer than we realised, Tenchi. Much longer. People have been uneasy since Ayeka and Takeru were first filmed here. No, probably even before that... when Ryoko and Seiryō had their little squabble at the nightclub. We’ve

been so busy in space that we've taken it for granted that everything's fine on the Earth. And it's not."

"You're saying this is our fault?" Tenchi pressed his hands against the glass. "All of this?"

"No. Not our fault." Washu shook her head. "But we were remiss not to notice it sooner. As it is..."

"Professor Hakubi!"

A voice cut across her at that moment, and Washu turned, meeting the startled gaze of the Kouken Industries chief owner with grave emerald eyes.

"Ishida-san." She murmured. "Apologies for the sudden intrusion — but we really need to talk."

"How did you get in here?" Ishida stared, and then, as his gaze flitted to Tenchi, his eyes widened. "And you... you..."

"Tenchi Masaki." Washu said quietly. "The man to whom your son and his companions have been paying particular attention of late."

"But... what..." Ishida paled, gazing at her uncertainly, and Washu offered him a sober look, spreading her hands.

"I told you some days ago that I would do whatever I could to help the Earth and I meant it." She said quietly. "That's why I'm here — why we're here. All this madness — it has to stop, Ishida-san. All this massing and hysteria — do you even realise what you're doing, by pushing doubt and fear into the minds of these people?"

"It's not me doing that." Ishida frowned. "The panic and fear was created by the alien intrusion. The people are only expressing their displeasure. I know that you're settler too, Professor, so you don't see it from the same perspective, but the Earth..."

"The Earth is a planet full of fools." Washu cut across him before he could finish speaking and he faltered, his eyes widening as he took in the resolute look in her gaze. "Listen to me. I have lived many, many more lifetimes than you or any of your companions. I've seen more than my fair share of uprisings, unrest and dissention. They never end well. And all you are doing is compromising your planet — not only in the eyes of its fellow people, but also in the eyes of the forces that truly threaten it."

"Forces that...?" Ishida murmured, his gaze shifting to Tenchi once more, and the Prince's eyes narrowed as something inside of him snapped.

“No, not my fiancée.” He retorted. “Ryoko has nothing to do with anything. She just wants a peaceful life on a planet she loves, that’s all. She’s never done anything to hurt anyone in this city — she doesn’t deserve to be treated the way you and Kenichi and Kyoda have been treating her.”

“Professor, why have you brought him here?” Ishida asked quietly, and Washu frowned.

“Because he’s an Earthling, like you are.” She said evenly. “A man who loves his planet as much as any other. And I’m brutally aware that you’re unlikely to listen to reason from me.”

Her tones became laced with disdain.

“After all, as you said, I’m just a settler, too.” She murmured. “What do I know about the death of planets?”

“What do you mean, the death?” Ishida demanded, and Washu eyed him coolly.

“As we speak, there is a powerful force in space preparing to launch a fatal blow to the Earth.” She said calmly, watching as the businessman’s face went through a mixture of expressions. “When we met in Tokyo last, Ishida-san, I had just discovered that some unknown force had tampered with my work and altered the designs, to ensure that the shields we had been creating had been shifted... just enough so that in the case of an assault, the Earth would not be defended.”

She shrugged.

“In the meantime, the anti-alien fervour has been growing.” She added. “I know that there’s a lot the Earth doesn’t yet understand, and I can sympathise with the way they feel. After all, my planet was invaded and oppressed, and as I said, I’ve seen far more of this than you. But you’re foolish and naive... you’re paranoid about alien activity, but you don’t realise that you’re already their pawn. Or did you not realise that even men who claim Earth descent have ulterior motives?”

“What do you mean?” Ishida whispered, and Washu bit her lip.

“Junichi Nakabito.” She said bluntly, and Ishida’s eyes widened, as he shook his head.

“Nakabito-san is...”

“A man born on a planet called Kanemitsu.” Washu interrupted. “A planet with serious political grievances against Jurai... and significant

links to terrorist organisations fighting for Kanemitsu's freedom. A very dangerous man, in fact... a man who is more than willing to sacrifice this planet in an attempt to discredit Jurai and achieve the liberation of his homeworld."

"Discredit... Jurai..."

"Jurai are very powerful." Washu continued. "They have pillaged and conquered before... it's true. But the Earth is not a world they'd choose to annexe. Aside from the impracticalities of governing such a remote planet, there are a few very precious things here that they would rather protect than harm."

Her gaze flitted to Tenchi, who nodded.

"My family are well known to Jurai's royal family." He agreed gravely. "Some years ago, the Princesses were stranded on this planet, because of political insurrection on their own. We helped them — and forged this bond. This is the connection you don't understand — Jurai's protection of the Earth is out of gratitude and mutual friendship. Ayeka and Sasami are very close friends of mine. And they would never, ever allow anything bad to befall this planet. They love it too much — both of them."

Ishida's eyes narrowed.

"And of course, even though the Princesses are gone, there are still those on the Earth with strong ties to Jurai." Washu continued, before the businessman could get in any words of protest. "People like Ryoko, the space pirate you seem so keen on vilifying."

"Ryoko..." Ishida frowned. "I've seen her history. Her dark past. Or are you saying that's another of these so-called lies of Nakabito's?"

"No... Ryoko's past is eclectic." Washu admitted ruefully. "But in terms of criminal activity, that ceased a long time ago. She served her sentence and was eventually pardoned on account of her services to Jurai's royal family. That was some time ago now — she's no longer the delinquent she once was."

She glanced at Tenchi, and her expression softened as she took in the flickering anxiety in his dark eyes.

"Thanks to her coming here and meeting Tenchi and his family." She added. "Ryoko has made it her personal interest to defend the Earth and it's people. Even though you're turning everyone against her, Ishida-san. You're too naive. Too simplistic. You believe a man is good because his father may have come from the Earth — you believe a woman is bad because her father came from Jurai. And unless

something is done forthwith, this planet will be destroyed because you failed to look beyond appearances and see people's true natures."

Ishida was silent for a moment, and Washu eyed him keenly, wondering whether her words were taking root inside his brain. At length he frowned, shaking his head.

"Just now I received a report from Agent Nakabito that Juraian spies had infiltrated the Galaxy Police and looked set to launch an attack on the Earth if the people did not try to prevent it." He said softly. "Now you say that he's behind the attack, and that Jurai are the innocents. Who do I believe? He's alien born, and so are you. How do I know who to put my faith in?"

"It might be too late either way." Washu said quietly. "If Nakabito truly does have the weapon we believe he has. Even my science has not been able to create anything to counteract it, not in such a short space of time. I'm good, but this is technology equal to my own, and about which I know very little. Or did Nakabito not tell you that his brother — of full Kanemitsu birth — is an expert in arms development?"

At this Ishida started, staring at her in horror, and Washu nodded.

"With significant links to several fringe extremist groups." She agreed grimly. "Now, you can follow the trail and find the smoking gun without my help. The bottom line is that the Earth have been nicely distracted... because of Nakabito's paranoia campaign, the people here have not done the one thing which might have protected them. They haven't called to Jurai for assistance. And because of that... thanks to the ease with which you and your companions have been manipulated... the Earth may well not survive."

Ishida sank down to his knees, and Washu could tell that this time her words had hit home. She frowned.

"Get up, you silly man." She said unsympathetically. "At least face it like an adult. You don't understand a bit about intergalactic politics — heck, you don't understand anything that doesn't fit your mould. You've attacked an innocent girl like Ryoko and suspected her of spying... do you even realise that had she not revealed herself in the nightclub a year and a half ago, a lot of people would have died in that fire? Kane Kyoda probably among them. Because Ryoko sacrificed her anonymity to protect the people, you and your kind have become aware of us and what we do here. Paranoia is a dangerous enemy at the best of times — but prejudice is ten times more dangerous. You believed what you wanted to believe."

Her eyes narrowed.

“And in the process you hurt my daughter.” She murmured. “Which I find very hard to forgive.”

“Your daughter?” Ishida’s head snapped up, and Washu nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “Ryoko is my daughter. You even said yourself that we had the same name... and I didn’t correct your assumption that it was coincidence. Ryoko is not from Jurai, even though her father was born there. If anything else, she’s more Kii than she is from any other race. And I’m not happy with what you’ve put her through, Ishida-san. Not happy at all.”

“So you’ve come here to get your revenge on me?” Washu saw his gaze flit to the desk, as if wondering if he could reach the security alarm before she could act, and she snorted.

“No. I’ve come to try and find a way to reason with you. In case by any remote possibility you have any influence with Nakabito.” She said bluntly. “Before this planet that both Ryoko and I have come to love is blown into smaller pieces than my own homeworld. My interests are the Earth’s. I told you that once before. Ryoko’s too. The only enemies here live in your head.”

Ishida gazed at her for a moment. Then he sighed.

“Even if what you say is true, what can be done about it?” He asked helplessly, and Washu realised with a jolt that he had believed her. “I have no influence over Nakabito — he contacts us, not the other way around. He’s been here, on and off, but at the moment he’s not... and we’ve pretty much done as he’s advised us to do. I doubt that, if he’s what you say, anything I do will have any effect.”

“Then I suppose we’re reliant on Kiyone and on her contacts to intercept him before he can reach the Earth.” Washu murmured, her heart sinking in her chest as she contemplated the hard reality of this. “I’ve done my best to repair the shields, and I’ve tried to find a way to defend the planet from sudden attack. But it’s not enough.”

Ishida’s face drained of all colour.

“So we’re all going to die?” He murmured.

“Probably.” Washu said grimly. “Massing and hysterical on the streets of Earth’s cities... blaming the wrong enemy.”

“And what about you?” Ishida demanded. Washu’s expression darkened.

“This is my home.” She said evenly. “Where else am I going to go?”

“Washu’s right.” Tenchi cast a glance out of the window, and Washu’s eyes opened wide as she registered the serious, thoughtful look in his brown eyes. “And maybe... Washu... maybe... there might be... a way.”

“A way?” Ishida echoed. “Masaki-san, what do you... a way to save the Earth after all?”

Tenchi nodded, and Washu frowned, as she realised what was going through his mind.

“I don’t know.” She murmured. “Even if you... Tenchi, do you have any idea what force we’re dealing with? You were there when Kihaku was destroyed. You saw how much it took out of Tsunami to hold together her shield and protect you, Mihoshi and Tokimi from the force of the blast. This weapon is just as powerful as that one... do you really understand what you’re considering?”

Tenchi bit his lip, then, slowly, he nodded.

“Yes.” He agreed gravely. “And I know... it might not work. But dammit, Washu, this is my planet too. And my home. And it’s Ryoko’s home. And yours. And everyone else’s. And I’m not going to just stand back... even if it’s too much for me, even if it kills me... what else can I do?”

“What does he mean?” Ishida asked fearfully, and Washu bit her lip.

“Tenchi is a blood descendant of the family you’ve been so dead set on hating.” She said slowly. “More than anything, his presence on the Earth is the principle reason Jurai will not invade it — and the strongest motive for their ongoing alliance and protection.”

“You’re... an alien... too?” Ishida stared at Tenchi, who shook his head impatiently.

“I’m an Earthling. I was born here, and so were both of my parents.” He snapped, and Washu realised that the pressure was starting to take its toll on his normally peaceable demeanour. “Stop thinking inside your box, Ishida-san. If someone doesn’t do something... and who the hell else is there to do anything? Even Ryoko with all her abilities isn’t strong enough to protect a whole planet from idiot fanatics. And Washu is right — I do have Juraian blood. And I’m not ashamed that I do.”

He frowned, his brows furrowing as he glanced up at the skyline.

“This is my home. It’s always been my home, since the day I was born.” He whispered. “Wherever I go, whatever I do, whoever I might be — I’m still Tenchi Masaki and I’m still a citizen of this planet. And I’ll do whatever I can to protect it, even if it is full of idiots who don’t even try to understand that there are bigger enemies in the universe than the imagined ones in people’s paranoid heads.”

Washu eyed him hesitantly.

“You’re really sure about this?” She murmured, and Tenchi nodded.

“I’m sure.” He said evenly. “It might not work, but it’s the only thing left to try. You said yourself, nothing you’ve created will work... well, let’s try something Tsunami created. After all, she protects Jurai, doesn’t she? Maybe... maybe I can protect the Earth. Somehow. And either way, it’s better than doing nothing, isn’t it?”

“Even if it kills you?”

“Well, if it does...” Tenchi hesitated for a moment, then he seemed to get to grips with himself, nodding resolutely.

“If it does, tell Ryoko I’m sorry.” He said honestly. “But at the end of the day, I... I can’t let anything happen to the Earth. Not if I... not if I can do something to stop it.”

Washu’s expression became sober, and she nodded.

“Then I need to hack into Earth’s sensors and log the path of any incoming ships.” She said evenly. “Ishida-san, the use of your office, if you please?”

Ishida nodded wordlessly, and Washu flexed her fingers, as her translucent laptop materialised in front of her. She keyed in a few digits, then sent Tenchi a slight, sad smile.

“You know, your family should be very proud of you.” She reflected. “I know I am.”

Tenchi smiled, but the gravity remained in his dark eyes.

“I’ll do my best.” He promised. “You just find out if and when something’s going to happen... and if I can do something — no matter what the cost — I’ll do it.”

He clenched his fists.

“You have my word.”

The Inazuma was definitely heading for the Earth.

As Seiryō shifted the Unko into its fastest gear, he sat back in the pilot's seat, fighting a mixture of impatience and frustration as he willed his craft to move more quickly across the expanse of space. Around him, stars seemed to twinkle mockingly as if concealing the whereabouts of Nakabito's streamlined ship from his desperate eyes, and he found that it was almost impossible not to let his thoughts stray to Kiyone and the uncertainty of her fate.

"If he kills her, I *will* kill him." He murmured, glancing at his hands as he fought the urge to punch the ship's computer in frustration. "I won't hold back this time. Not this fight. No matter what the consequences are for me. I won't forgive him — if he does."

He swallowed hard, closing his eyes as the thought of her death drove a wave of panic over him.

"Stop it." He muttered. "Stop it! Hideki was right — I need all my skill and rationality at the moment. I can't think of Kiyone — or that she might be dead. Logic is that she's probably not... not yet, anyway. If he took her, he wants something from her. Information... something. Otherwise it would have been easy to kill her at Headquarters... less compromising. Breathe, Seiryō. Get your emotions under damn control! I won't fall to pieces over this... I'm going to find him, rescue Kiyone and stop him from attacking the Earth!"

He drew a heavy breath of air into his lungs as gradually the sensation subsided, and he sighed, opening his eyes as he gazed out at the black expanse once more.

"I love her." He murmured bitterly. "Dammit, *why* do I? When Ryousuke said it so casually, I... I don't know. It sounded... so wrong. Even though Tokimi's said it. Even though I've said it to myself time and time again... when he put it into simple words like that, I felt... what was it? Ashamed? No. Not that. There's no shame in loving someone as strong as she is... surely? But... what is it, then?"

He bit his lip, chewing down on it as he contemplated.

"Is it just that... that I've done such terrible things to her in the past?" He wondered. "What kind of a man am I, anyway? One who sparked Junichi Nakabito into this kind of resentful rage? One who caused the Earth to become paranoid about alien activity? One who attacked a good Officer of the Galaxy Police, and then had the temerity to fall in love with her? What have I done to deserve the return of such feelings? I'm a Tennan. I've used women. I've used *people*. I've caused trouble just by following my own selfish ends.

Father's death was my fault, but Suki must live with the shadow of it for the rest of her life... Tokimi... Even Tokimi is a victim of Tennan greed, and I was not even able to prevent Ryouzuke and Hideki digging through her memories to find out what they wanted to know. All because I've been wrapped up in myself and Mother... but... I..."

He faltered, burying his head in his hands.

"I'm not good enough to love her." He admitted to himself. "Even though I do, I... I shouldn't. That's what it is I feel. Why it feels wrong. Because I... I don't have the right... to love Kiyone."

He got to his feet, pacing across the drive room as another realisation occurred to him.

"I will save her life, if I can." He murmured. "But am I only doing it because I don't want her to be gone from my life, like Mother is? Is it only selfish, then, like everything else that I do? Am I really chasing the Inazuma to protect the Earth, to stop Nakabito, to save Kiyone's life for her sake? Or is it all for my own — if Kiyone wasn't involved, would I even have left Jurai? And if I didn't feel like this, dammit, would I care about an idiot like Nakabito attacking the Earth?"

As his emotions threatened to overwhelm him a second time, the Unko suddenly flashed a light across its dashboard and Seiryō gritted his teeth, inwardly grateful for the diversion as he hurried to scan the ship's radar screen. Where it had been blank moments before, now there was the flickering green blip of another ship in the sector, and as Seiryō feverishly keyed in data codes, the craft's ident flared up on the screen. He clenched his fists.

"Inazuma." He muttered. "Good. I need a distraction."

He glanced at his hands, noticing that they were shaking slightly from the force of his brush with panic, and he remembered the conversation he had overheard between his sisters and the Princess, back on Jurai.

"This is why Suki has tried to protect me." He murmured, his eyes opening wide with realisation. "I shut her out, but she still understands... even if she doesn't know about Kiyone, she knows I'm not as in control as I'd like to be. And that's why she wanted to keep me out of this. Because she was afraid that I'd lose it — that I'd not be able to handle the situation so close to Mother's death. As ever, my sister is the smart one in the family, and I... I am the fool. But it's too late to worry about that now. I'm here and I can't turn back. The Inazuma's within my sights, and that means Kiyone is too. So I can't back out. I need to get a grip and focus on what I need to do. The

nervous breakdown can wait till later, when it's all over."

He ran his hand over the ship's navigation system.

"Autopilot override. Activating voice control." He murmured. "Unko, this is Tennan, Seiryō. Passcode 98352. Voice imprint check now. Convert to vocal communications... I need to talk to you."

"*Granted.*" The Unko's smooth digitised voice hissed through the craft's speakers. "*Checking voice ident and passcode. Match found. Greetings, Seiryō Tennan. Awaiting further orders.*"

"Good." Seiryō nodded, resting his hands firmly on the dashboard as he gathered his shredded composure. "Then listen to me carefully. I want you to shift coordinates to seven-eight-oh-six."

"*Confirming course change. Seven-eight-oh-six.*" Unko agreed flatly, and Seiryō felt the judder of the ship changing its course. He nodded.

"Right. Now I want you to track and trace — ship ident 9344-553-5531." He murmured. "Lock sensors and do not lose. This is our prey, Unko. We're going to nail him just like we nailed all the others. You're faster than that tin can of a ship he calls his own, and we're going to use that to our advantages. Do not lose him."

"*Confirmation. Sensors locked.*" The Unko responded, and Seiryō was aware of the flare of the booster engines as his silver ship increased its pace, honing in on the Inazuma as the flicker on the radar screen became more and more vivid. As he glanced around him, Seiryō realised where he was, and he cursed, shaking his head.

"Too close to the Earth." He murmured. "Dammit... and I had hoped we'd avoid this. Still, if it's how it's going to be — we have no choice. Unko, bring yourself into range for communications. I want to connect to the other ship... and speak to the bastard captain flying it."

"*Error.*" Unko responded in its flat, sterile voice. "*Communication range is not open.*"

"Then get his attention some other way." Seiryō said darkly. "Fire a flare into the space next to his ship, Unko. Note, next to. I don't want you to hit it. An ally is on board that craft — at least, I believe she is — and I won't have her life put in danger if I can help it."

"*Locking coordinates for warning fire. Preparing laser cannons.*" Unko hissed. "*Laser cannons prepared. Confirm order to fire?*"

"Confirmed." Seiryō said quietly. "Fire."

"*Understood.*" Unko's principle laser glittered into life, and Seiryō

watched with almost grim detachment as the bolt of energy flared across the blackness, lighting up the barren environment as it exploded mere feet from the Inazuma's hull. The enemy craft shuddered slightly from the force of the explosion, but Unko's aim had been perfect, and Seiryō registered with some relief that it had done no damage to the ship itself.

"That should tell him we're here." He reflected out loud. "It's been a long time since we've teamed up this way, Unko — have you missed it as much as I have?"

"Order is not understood." Unko's words reverberated around drive room. *"Awaiting command."*

"Never mind." Seiryō shook his head. "Try the communications channel again."

"Incoming communication." Unko's dashboard glittered with a bevy of lights. *'Communicating ship, Ident 9344-553-5531. Codename "Inazuma". Captain, Junichi Nakabito, Agent number...'*

"All right, enough with that." Seiryō interrupted impatiently. "Connect."

"Connecting." Unko agreed, and the communications screen flared into life, revealing the pixellised image of a man Seiryō knew that, right at the moment, he hated more than anyone he had ever hated before.

"Nakabito." He said coldly, and the man's eyes narrowed as his expression became a scowl.

"What the hell do you want, firing blasts at my ship?" He demanded. "You're trying to kill your former colleagues too, now? Do you still hate me so much as that, Seiryō, that you'd chase me across space and try to blow me up?"

"Don't waste my time with the protestations of innocence." Seiryō said frankly. "Where is Kiyone Makibi?"

"Kiyone who?" Nakabito's voice held a faintly mocking ring, and Seiryō's eyes narrowed to near slits.

"Answer me." He said quietly. "If you've hurt her, you'll regret it."

"You've come to pull your little spy out before she reveals all your secrets?" Nakabito looked derisive. "How impressive of you. But it doesn't matter. I already know that you and she have some kind of political connection. And besides, the plan is already in motion. Whatever you think you know, it's not important. You can't stop me."

“Can’t I?” Seiryō raised an eyebrow, and Nakabito smiled slightly.

“You can blow up my ship.” He said softly. “But if you do, you might catch your little mouse in the blast, too.”

An image flashed up on the screen, and Seiryō’s heart lurched as he registered the fact that Kiyone was without a doubt aboard the Inazuma. Rage flooded through him as he registered her bonds, the look in her eyes both fearful and determined, but at the same time relief washed over his senses. She was not dead. And he could still save her.

“You seem rather lost for words.” Nakabito taunted him. “Or is it that you’re actually fonder of this spy of yours than I thought? She’s truly someone you consider a friend?”

“She is.” Seiryō gathered himself. “And I won’t let you kill her.”

“Well, then perhaps we can make a deal.” Nakabito reflected. “Take the Unko. Leave this sector. Let me do what I need to do. You’re not with the Elite any more. My actions are none of your business. And I might let Kiyone Makibi live.”

“You plan to destroy an innocent planet, and frame me and my own for the crime.” Seiryō said coldly. “You have become as bad as any terrorist sympathiser, Nakabito, whatever your motivation. And I remember well my training... you do not make deals with terrorists.”

“So I’ll kill her then, shall I?” Nakabito asked quietly, and Seiryō felt the plunge of ice stab through him at his opponent’s words. Somehow he controlled himself, glaring at his long-term rival.

“You forget who you are dealing with.” He said frankly, in more level tones than he realised he was capable of. “I am not the kind of man who you can emotionally blackmail nor manipulate. I represent the Lady Sasami, whose friend Kiyone Makibi also is. I am charged with the duty of safely recovering her, and of preventing you in your vile assault against the primitive planet known as Earth. Earth has Jurai’s protection. And I, Junichi Nakabito, am that exact thing.”

“You’re Jurai’s protection? For a planet you once attacked?” Nakabito snorted. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“My crimes are nothing compared to yours.” Seiryō snapped back. “And at least I had the honour to resign my post when I was able to do so. You use the Galaxy Police as a base for your evil intentions, and that is worse than anything I ever did.”

“And you think you can stop me?”

“I know I can.” Seiryō said darkly. He cast a glance at his ship’s control panel, scooping up the ship’s key and slipping it onto his wrist.

“Unko, re-activate auto-pilot, and hold this position. Launch defense shields and be prepared to evade any attacks.”

“*Affirmative.*” Unko’s control panel flared into life once more. Seiryō frowned, then,

“Prepare to transmit me to ship ident 9344-553-5531.” He said quietly. “And await my further orders.”

“What are you playing at now?” Nakabito demanded, and Seiryō grimaced at him.

“I’m coming to renew our acquaintance.” He said, brushing his hand over the hilt of his lightsword as he did so. “And to prove to you once and for all who is the better fighter. You couldn’t beat me eleven years ago, and you won’t beat me today. I told you — I’m not an enemy you want to have. I am a Tennan, after all. And *you* are just another Kanemitsu rebel looking for trouble. Such people disgust me.”

“Not as much as you disgust me.” Nakabito spat back. “Fine. Come aboard. I’ll just kill you and your spy both, and then blow up your precious spaceship in the process. You can’t save the Earth... you have no concept of the technology I have in my possession. I already told you... nothing can save that pathetic, wretched planet. And in the name of Kanemitsu — in the name of revenge... I *will* put you to rest once and for all!”

Chapter 15

Chapter Fifteen

The bay of the Inazuma seemed unnaturally silent as Seiryō found himself beamed into the heart of the enemy ship, and as he made his way cautiously along the flat, smooth panelled flooring, his fingers strayed to the hilt of his lightsword, ready and poised for the onset of any surprise attack. At least, he reflected, as he reached the doors leading to the main control gallery, the Inazuma was a standard issue Elite craft, and as such, it was easy to navigate.

“Not custom built like the Unko.” He murmured to himself, running his fingers along the edge of the doorway as he felt for the release lock, half expecting it to block his progress. However, it did not, and the door slid back with a hiss as if inviting him further in.

For a moment he hesitated, unsure whether or not this was some kind of trap designed to lure him into a false sense of security. Then the image of Kiyone tied and bound flashed into his mind and he gritted his teeth, his brows furrowing in determination as he pulled his sword from its scabbard, pressing on. At his touch, the blade glimmered and flared into a strong beam of white hot light and somehow the sight of it comforted him somewhat. He had fought Nakabito before, he reminded himself. And on that day too he had emerged triumphant.

“But we were boys then. Adolescent. Mere children.” He reflected. “And the fate of so much did not hang so uneasily in the balance.”

As he stepped onto the upper landing leading to the drive room, for the first time Seiryō was aware that there was life on board the ship, as the lights around him flickered and flared to acknowledge his presence. The drive room door slid back and, a look of resolution in his teal eyes, he stepped forward, scanning the chamber for any sign of his enemy.

“Welcome aboard.”

Nakabito stepped out before him, offering him a slight, deceptive smile as he gauged his opponent’s tense demeanour. “I know the Inazuma isn’t quite the Unko when it comes to luxury and comfort, but I trust you’ll make yourself at home.”

“What game are you playing, Nakabito?” Seiryō’s eyes narrowed

suspiciously, and he gazed around him once more. “Where’s Kiyone? Why are you looking at me like that? Do you really think you can kill me that easily?”

“Probably.” Nakabito nodded. “This is my ship. But having you aboard suits me fine, in the end. After all, you play right into my hands, coming here in a blaze of pointless glory like you have.”

His lips twisted into an amused, cold smile.

“Your presence on my ship may explain a few things, in the case of the Inazuma’s ident being picked up on scanners.” He added frankly. “If you were to hijack my ship, for example, to use it to attack the Earth in an attempt to frame Kanemitsu for your own selfish ends...”

He trailed off, and his eyes glittered with a hint of fanaticism.

“Of course, in the struggle to regain control of my ship, I got free and killed you.” He whispered, taking a step towards his companion and Seiryō was dimly aware of the glitter of a lightsword in his own grip. “And of course, the girl.”

“You’re forgetting an important point.” Seiryō snapped back. “I might yet kill *you*. Or do you really think you’ve reached the standard of a Lord of Jurai?”

“I have learnt to fight your way, Seiryō.” Nakabito shrugged, holding up his sword. “You told me eleven years ago that you didn’t fight with fists. I’ll tell you now that I’ll fight with whatever it takes to beat you — I hope that won’t put you at too much of a disadvantage.”

He smiled, that cold, unpleasant smile once more, and Seiryō realised his old classmate had truly parted company with his wits. He snorted in disgust.

“You look half-crazed, staring at me like that.” He said disparagingly. “You really have let your base blood get the better of you, haven’t you?”

“Base blood.” Nakabito echoed mockingly. “Kanemitsu or Earth? Which? The people you’re trying to ‘protect’ or the ones your people have subjugated for far too long?”

“Whichever one it was that turned you into a homicidal fanatic.” Seiryō said coldly. “Besides, even if you did manage to kill me, you’d not be able to frame me for anything. Lady Sasami is my benefactor. She’d not stand for it.”

“I’ll bring her down too, if I have to.” Nakabito threatened, and Seiryō laughed out loud.

“Lady Sasami? Tsunami-kami-sama? You must have a death-wish, then!”

“I’m not afraid of demons, ghosts or goddesses.” Nakabito said briskly. “And nor am I afraid of you.”

“Then that makes us even.” Seiryō said levelly. “If you’re so sure on hurting me, what’s taking you so long to do it?”

“I’d like to take my time killing you. I’d like to savour the experience.” Nakabito admitted.

“Where is Kiyone?”

“The girl?” Nakabito looked surprised. “Your little spy? You needn’t worry about her. Right now, she’s quite safe. A little uncomfortable, I imagine... but I haven’t killed her. Not yet, anyway. With your interruption, I haven’t had time to set the scene properly — and a good agent never leaves anything to chance.”

“*Where is she?!*” Seiryō raised his blade threateningly, and Nakabito laughed, holding out his own to ward off the Juraian’s sudden display of temper. He gestured towards the back wall of the ship, and Seiryō’s eyes widened as he took in Kiyone’s form huddled and slumped against the control units, clearly unconscious. A faint trickle of blood dripped down her face, and even from that distance Seiryō could tell she was tightly restrained. A flare of indignation welled up inside of him, and he cast Nakabito a cold glare.

“You’ll regret hurting her.” He murmured.

“Very noble.” Nakabito said derisively. “But it’s your fault, in a sense, that I laid her out like this. On the off-chance something goes wrong, I don’t want her as a witness to my killing you if it can be at all helped. It was just a small blow to the head — nothing lethal. As I said. Yet. I’ll save that for later.”

He smiled.

“I had a feeling when we spoke before that you were fonder of her than you were saying.” He added. “And I thought that seeing her in some distress might well knock you off your purpose just a little. Besides, it seems fitting — if she truly is someone you’ve actually managed to care about. If that’s so, killing her will bring me more satisfaction than I thought.”

“I’m not going to let you kill her, you idiot. Haven’t you realised that yet?”

“We’ll see.” Nakabito snorted. “You’ve become a soft fool, Seiryō,

and I've no qualms about exploiting that fact. I told you... I'll use whatever methods I have available to me if it means killing you."

"And I'll use whatever methods available to me to save Kiyone and to protect the Earth from your scheming." Seiryō spat back, as the blade of his sword glimmered ever more brightly. "Enough words, Nakabito. If you feel you're so much stronger than you were, prove it to me. You aren't the only one who has learnt things over the past eleven years — but if you're so sure you can get past my blade, come and be my guest."

"With pleasure." Nakabito's eyes narrowed, and he launched himself at his foe, the force of his charge almost taking Seiryō off guard as he brought his blade up just in time to parry the viciousness of the swipe. He summoned his strength, forcing the image of Kiyone's distress from his mind as he focused all his energy on pushing his opponent back, and as he did so, he once again saw the glitter of madness in the other man's gaze. That Nakabito had been driven over the edge was more than a little concerning, he mused, as he parried another shot, preparing to sweep his own blade in the direction of the other man. It meant that his moves and his actions were no longer so easy to define by rational, tactical methods, and he realised with a jolt that it truly would be a fight to the death.

"Mine or his." He muttered, tightening his grip on his blade as Nakabito charged him a second time, bringing his own sword hilt down hard against Seiryō's right forearm. Seiryō resisted the urge to cry out, instead using the force of his body to push Nakabito away from him as he steadied his composure, preparing for another assault. His arm throbbed and ached, but with some relief he realised that Nakabito's skill with his weapon was clumsy and haphazard, and as a result the injury would prove no more than a nasty bruise.

"So long as I survive the encounter enough for it to manifest as such." He muttered, parrying another vicious swing of Nakabito's blade as he launched himself onto the offensive, his eyes on the other man's right fist. "If I could disarm him, I might yet overpower him and prevent any kind of serious bloodshed. If I could do that, and hand him over to Ryōsuke and Hideki, all would be well and everyone would be safe. That's surely the best thing to do... if I can get the blade away from him, surely I can beat him down. With his technique like this, he's dangerous — but only because he's crazy enough not to care what he's doing. He has no skill or true technique — I must be stronger than him in the long run. Mustn't I?"

"Are you daydreaming, Seiryō?" Nakabito taunted, and Seiryō

forced his attention back to the matter at hand, glowering at his opponent as he swung his sword once more.

“Well, you’re rather boring to fight.” He shot back. “You really haven’t learnt as much as you think, have you?”

He swung his arm again, bringing his hilt down against the Agent’s right hand as the man’s weapon clattered out of his grip and onto the floor, and he drew a deep breath, relief flickering in his eyes as he moved to block Nakabito’s path to retrieve it.

“I can still take you off guard.” He said softly. “You can surrender now, if you like. I don’t want to kill you... it’s not why I came here. You should face the Galaxy Police Tribunal and take their justice... I’m not the one who should be carrying it out.”

“You sound so full of yourself, talking like that.” Nakabito spat. “But I told you, I’d use whatever I had to take you down. And I will, Seiryō. You took my blade — well, fine. I fight in other ways too, you know... you’re not so clever as you think you are.”

Before Seiryō could react, Nakabito had lunged for the control panel, hitting a succession of switches as he did so, then turning to face his foe triumphantly.

“Say goodbye to the Earth.” He whispered. “There’s nothing you can do about it now. Kill me or don’t, that planet will still be space dust in a matter of minutes. Still feeling smug, Lord Tennan? What will your Emperor say when he discovers that you’ve failed?”

Despite himself Seiryō faltered, as the rumble of the ship beneath his feet told him that his foe was not bluffing. He shoved Nakabito aside, scanning the control panel with a mixture of desperation and dismay as he realised that the Agent was right — there was no obvious way to shut down the weapon, and it was already preparing its bolt to fire.

“Seiryō! Look out!” Kiyone’s scream jolted him from his panic, as he realised the captive had regained consciousness, and he turned towards her as out of the corner of his eye he saw a shadow coming down towards him quick and fast. Before he could react, something barged into him, knocking him to the ground and sending his own sword careening out of his grasp. He swallowed hard, struggling to understand what had happened as he suddenly felt the prick of a hot white blade touch his throat.

“You really *are* daydreaming.” Nakabito’s voice echoed softly in his ear, and Seiryō realised that his split-second of distraction had

allowed the other man to retrieve his weapon and gain the advantage. “You’re too arrogant, Seiryō. You assume too much. That’s your trouble... and in the end, it’s going to cost you your life.”

“*Seiryō!*” Kiyone’s shriek seemed somehow far away, as Seiryō’s mind was dragged back to another time when he had found himself in a similar, precarious situation. He muttered a curse, struggling to force back the image of his father bearing down on him, hot blade in his hand as his cold teal eyes prepared for the kill. Nakabito’s eyes were not cold, he realised vaguely, but almost glimmering with anticipation and for a moment the nobleman felt paralysed, half-waiting for the sweep of his opponent’s weapon to slice through his jugular.

“Seiryō, god-dammit, *fight back!*” Kiyone’s yell broke through his hazy awareness and he forced himself to focus back on the situation at hand. This was not Jurai, and it was not Seiji that stood over him, but a far more inferior fighter whose physical strength was considerably less than the former Lord Tennan’s had been. There was no Suki in the shadows to come to his rescue this time, and as he remembered his sister’s flowing tears, he found his resolve hardening as he stretched out his right hand, feeling desperately for the smooth carved surface of the weapon that had served him well so many times before in conflict.

This time he would settle matters himself.

Whatever the consequences.

“Lost for words?” Nakabito asked him quietly, and Seiryō gazed up at him, distaste in his malachite eyes as he met his companion’s mocking green eyes with resolute malachite ones of his own.

“I’ve nothing to say to you.” He replied softly, as at last his fingers brushed against his sword, drawing it closer to the rest of his hand as he focused on engaging his enemy’s attention. “You’re still no swordsman, Nakabito. And even if you kill me, you’ll still not be any better than me.”

“You’re still as stuck up as ever.” Nakabito’s brow creased in annoyance, and Seiryō shook his head, mindful of the weapon that still shimmered at his throat.

“Not because of that.” He murmured. “Eleven years ago, we were both idiot boys. The difference is, I’ve moved on. You’re still stuck in that loop. Maybe being born a Lord of Jurai is not better than being born of Kanemitsu or Earth. I grant you that lesson — I’ve learnt it the hard way. But being someone who tries to save life is infinitely better than being someone who looks to end it. And because of that,

Nakabito, I'll always be better than you. It's still the case now, as it was back then. No matter how hard you try, you'll never reach me."

"Why, you..." Rage flared in Nakabito's eyes at this and he drew his weapon back, preparing to plunge it through Seiryō's throat, but by now the nobleman had his fingers securely wrapped around his own sword's hilt and he acted quickly, drawing the blade up and thrusting it without hesitation through Nakabito's Elite Agent uniform and into his body.

For a moment, it was as if time had stopped, for Nakabito seemed to freeze, confused by what had happened. Then, as blood began to pool across the front of his shirt, he choked and fell back on his knees, his weapon slipping forgotten from his fingers as he clutched his hands to the seeping wound in his chest. Blood bubbled from his lips, spilling onto the white collar of his uniform and staining it a rich, vibrant red, the brightness of the blood marking a direct contrast to the sudden grey pallor of the Agent's complexion.

Seiryō closed his eyes briefly as his blade flickered out, glancing at the blooded hilt for a moment as he registered what he had done. He slipped it reluctantly back into his belt, struggling slowly and unsteadily to his feet as he gazed down on Nakabito's stricken form.

"I'm sorry." He said softly. "I told you that I didn't want to kill you."

"So much for saving life, Lord of Jurai." Nakabito raised a heavy arm to clumsily brush the blood from his lips, sending Seiryō the most poisonous look he could muster as he fought to bring himself into a sitting position. Already Seiryō could tell his companion's breathing was becoming laboured, and he pursed his lips, acknowledging to himself that his aim had been too good — that in the adrenalin of the moment he had struck to kill, and not just to bring his opponent down.

"Unsteady emotions. Unstable mind. Lack of concentration." He berated himself inwardly as Nakabito twitched and retched, blood pooling on the spaceship's floor beneath his spasming body. "You're still a fool, Tennan. An arrogant, overconfident fool. And another man is going to die because you haven't yet learnt to think before you act."

"Well?" Nakabito raised his head, his body shuddering with the effort of trying to maintain his breathing. "Nothing to say? So much for your big words, Seiryō... in the end, you've proved th... that you're just the h... hypocrite I always knew you were."

"Nakabito..."

“Shut up.” Nakabito snapped, clasping more tightly at his wounded chest as he sent Seiryō a glare. “I don’t want to hear it. Your whining voice is the last thing I want echoing in my ears — damn well use that sword of yours and kill me properly — if you’re enough of a... a man to know how.”

Seiryō was silent for a moment, as his fingers slipped slowly towards the blooded hilt. Then he paused, shaking his head.

“I’m not authorised to carry out executions or mete out justice.” He said softly. “That’s the job of Jurai’s court, and the Galaxy Police Tribunal. I won’t give you what you want, Nakabito. I won’t make you a martyr. In the heat of battle is one thing — but I won’t strike you in cold blood.”

“You know you’ve already... killed me.” Nakabito hissed. “And besides, the Earth is still doomed. I won’t be Kanemitsu’s only m... martyr, in the final analysis. You can’t stop the weapon from firing — not now. It’s locked... it w... won’t respond to any amount of hacking now. And I can... I can destroy this... this ship with the... flick of a button. So then... we *all* die. Not just... me.”

Seiryō frowned, the faint flicker of sympathy and remorse that had fluttered through him fading and dying at these cold words. He shook his head.

“You’ll die here alone, then.” He said evenly. “Blow up your ship, if you want to. Kiyone and I won’t be here to see it.”

With that he turned his back on the still gasping Agent, hurrying across the floor of the ship to where Kiyone was watching him, a mixture of fright and relief on her face. He touched the blood that ran down her cheek, wiping it away then reaching out to take her hands in his.

“Unko, prepare to transmit.” He said softly, and the ship’s key on his wrist glittered and glowed with acceptance of his orders.

“Seiryō?” Kiyone murmured, and Seiryō shook his head.

“Transmit now.” He said quietly, as the surroundings of the Inazuma began to fade and blur out of view around him. As the drive room of the Unko came more clearly into focus, he let out a sigh, releasing his grasp on Kiyone as he turned to glance out towards the Earth.

“Can you stop it?” Kiyone asked fearfully, and Seiryō frowned, shaking his head.

“Even if the Unko fired a cannon at the Inazuma and blew it to smithereens, it would be too late.” He said regretfully. “The force of such an explosion would carry the blast just as well as if we left the ship intact. Unless Nakabito manages to detonate his own craft, I don’t intend on trying.”

“But the Earth...?”

“I hope Washu has some smart technology up her sleeve.” Seiryō said darkly. “Because otherwise... there’s nothing the Unko can do in this situation. If the weapon is as Ryōsuke and Hideki said it was...”

He shook his head.

“Right now, though, I should untie you.” He said softly.

“Nakabito... did you... was he right? *Will* he die from that?” Kiyone asked quietly, as her companion crouched at her side, gently un-knotting the firmly tied bonds. Seiryō nodded.

“Without a doubt, explosion or otherwise.” He agreed soberly. “He won’t survive much longer... probably not long enough to even activate his craft’s self-destruct mechanism. It was a fatal blow — probably pierced his heart, if not one of the vessels close to it. I was trained to aim and to take down enemies in such a fashion, if the circumstances were life or death.”

His lips thinned.

“Unfortunately in a situation like that my training is instinctive... I acted only with the will to survive.” He admitted. “It wasn’t what I intended — but it cannot be taken back. Even by the time I radio for help — I don’t believe there’s anything that can be done to save his life now. Hideki will be cross with me for killing his prime suspect — but in the final analysis, there was nothing else I could do. And I had to stop him — he was insane and he would have killed us both. He may already have doomed the Earth, thanks to my moment of hesitation.”

He sighed.

“As it is, had I killed him sooner, he would not have had a chance to hit that button at all.”

“I guess that’s true.” Kiyone looked thoughtful, and as Seiryō unfastened the last of her bonds, she gazed up at him.

“What are you even doing here, anyway? I thought you were tied up on Jurai.”

“Rescuing you, what else do you think?” Seiryō demanded. “You went and got yourself kidnapped, after all.”

“For your sake!”

“Maybe.” Seiryō acknowledged. “But even so... you were fortunate that the Unko is as fast as it is — and, I suppose, that I was trained for so long in the use of the light sword.”

He shrugged, glancing back towards the Inazuma, as it drifted aimlessly alongside them.

“The cannon will fire in a few seconds from now.” He added. “Nakabito really did lose his wits... all because he was jealous of me? Because of my position? Because of my standing? I don’t understand. Perhaps he really was just crazy... but it seems so... pointless. We were rivals, true, but... this is extreme to the point of being ridiculous.”

Kiyone stared at him for a moment, and Seiryō had the briefest impression he had said something wrong. He frowned, shaking his head.

“Kiyone?”

Kiyone did not answer him. Instead she got carefully to her feet, eying him for a moment with the same strange, unreadable expression, and Seiryō began to feel distinctly uneasy.

“Kiyone, please don’t look at me that way. At least tell me...”

Kiyone’s eyes narrowed, and she glanced at her hand briefly for a moment, as if contemplating something. Then she nodded, and Seiryō’s eyes opened wide in surprise as she brought her palm down hard across his left cheek.

“*Kiyone*”

“Get a clue.” Kiyone said bluntly. “I’m going to clean myself up — you should do the same. And if you can, radio the Earth. Get Washu aware that this *thing* is coming — just in case there’s something she can do to stop it.”

“But... you just...”

“Just do it, you ape!” Kiyone snapped. “We can worry about anything else after! The Earth is in danger — we have to at least *try* to stop it!”

With that she was gone towards the ship’s rear living quarters, and Seiryō stared after her, a look of bewilderment and disbelief on his

face. Gingerly he touched his cheek, slowly shaking his head.

“What was that for?” He murmured. “I came all this way... for her to slap me? I do not understand women. *I do not understand women!*”

He sighed, rubbing his temples as from the left hand window of his craft he became aware of a brightening glow from the direction of the Inazuma.

“Girls later. Earth first.” He muttered. “Even if it’s to no avail, she’s right. Unko, open a communications channel to Washu’s laboratory — if you can. Eight-six-five frequency double eight-nine-two... at once, top priority.”

“Connection denied. No signal received from this location.”

“Dammit.” Seiryō grimaced. “Then we’ll have to try the only other thing we can. Unko, prepare your lasers to fire in the direction of that cannon’s blast. Maintain autopilot and keep this course... and *do not* hit the Inazuma if you can avoid it. Hideki won’t forgive me if I deny him his evidence, and I want him in a good mood when I present him with a corpse. I want you to aim at the cannon blast only. Do you understand?”

“Affirmative. Target locked. Preparing cannons for fire.” The Unko agreed, and Seiryō sighed, knowing even as he heard the hum of his ship’s weapons system that such an attempt would prove futile.

“We’re dealing with technology the Unko isn’t kitted out to handle.” He murmured. “Even if I was to fly the ship into the beam of the blast and sacrifice it, it wouldn’t make a difference. A weapon to take out a planet would dissolve a spaceship and still carry on its programmed path. No matter what you do, Seiryō... it looks like the Earth is doomed.”

The streets of Osaka were brimming with yet more and more people as Ryoko left Sakura’s apartment, determination on her face as she teleported into the centre of the city. She perched on the top of a low-level business premises as she surveyed the scene, realising as she did so that this hysteria was no accident, and that Seguru Ishida and his underground connections had managed to set genuine panic into play.

She cursed, clenching her fists as she remembered her fight with Tenchi.

“Because of this bunch of idiots, he and I aren’t speaking.” She muttered. “Kane Kyoda, you’re lucky that Sakura told me not to use

my magic — otherwise you might find yourself a touch crispier than usual!”

“Ryoko! The pirate! It’s Ryoko! She’s up there!”

A yell from the crowd drew her attention back down and she frowned, her brows knitting together as she realised that she had become the centre of attention. An empty cola bottle, followed by several other harmless missiles shot past her and she grimaced, spreading her hands as she projected a forcefield around her body. As the would-be arsenal glanced harmlessly off her magic, there were gasps and yells from the massed group at her feet, and she narrowed her eyes, bracing herself before jumping nimbly down into their midst.

“Stop being idiots!” She exclaimed. “Can’t a girl just move around the city without attracting all this attention?”

“But you’re one of *them*!” A girl pushed forward, and despite herself, Ryoko was taken aback by the animosity in her dark eyes. “You’re one of the aliens — you’ve come from Jurai to kill us all!”

“If I wanted to kill you, you idiot, don’t you think I’d have done it by now?” Ryoko demanded, regretting the words as soon as they had left her lips, for at them the crowd reacted in panic, as if she had issued a death ultimatum there and then. More missiles came her way, and she flexed her fingers a second time, repelling the random bits of litter back onto the tarmac.

“Stop it.” She said again. “How many times do I have to say it — I’m not here to fight anyone! And at least get your alien ethnicities straight — I’m *not* from Jurai!”

“You’re still the enemy.” A boy told her coldly. “You and the people who shelter you.”

Ryoko’s eyes narrowed at this, and she frowned, as her forcefield flickered and faded out.

“Throwing things through Sakura’s window is harassment.” She said quietly. “And I don’t let my friends get hurt by anyone. I came out here because of that — so leave her out of it, okay? If you want to fling abuse and junk at me, well, then get it out of your system... if it makes you feel better to gang up on the pirate, so be it. But if you hurt Sakura or any of my friends, you will find yourself in trouble. They have Jurai’s protection too. Just like your stupid planet — if you were smart enough to realise it!”

“Jurai want to invade the Earth!” A more familiar voice broke

through the crowd and Ryoko's eyes darkened as she saw Kenichi Ishida pushing through to the front. He eyed her with dislike, and she folded her arms across her chest, glaring back at him with equal venom.

"I don't know what galactic manuals you've been reading, but Jurai wouldn't waste ten seconds over the Earth if they had any choice about it." She said quietly. "You and your moron companions don't understand anything at all. Jurai don't *have* to protect this planet. They're doing so because it's important to them that you —and all the ungrateful freaks running riot all over the place — are allowed to carry on living your lives in peace. You have no idea what other things are out there. Jurai's protection is a good thing. You're all so naïve. If not for Jurai, you might all be dead. You may still wind up that way. Your stupidity is really annoying."

"You already tried to kill me once. You and your friend." Kenichi accused, and Ryoko snorted.

"I told you. If I'd tried to kill you, you'd be dead." She said frankly, amber light glittering from her fingers as if to emphasise her point.

"You see! She's a freak of nature! She has electricity coming from her hands, dammit!" The hysterical girl exclaimed, and Ryoko nodded, spreading her fingers as the ball of light grew stronger.

"Yes, I do." She murmured. "I can make pretty lights appear with my fingers — isn't that clever?"

She spoke sarcastically, sending them an impatient look.

"Dammit, do you think that if I intended to hurt anyone, I would have laid off doing it?" She asked softly. "I have enough magic in my big toe to lay any of you out on the ground just by pointing at you. But you know what? I ain't that kind of pirate. I don't take lives."

"Then how do you explain what happened to me?" Kenichi demanded. "You and your accomplice... you and this Haki..."

"Haki is dead." Ryoko cut across him scornfully. "He's been dead for years — at least get your facts straight. The one who shot you? Your buddy Junichi Nakabito. Now what do you think, huh? Who's really your enemy? Me or him?"

"You're lying!"

"Fraid not." Ryoko shook her head. "So calm your little heads down and go home, huh? Be good boys and girls and stop being puppets of idiots like him."

“Nakabito is an ally of the Earth. His father was born here!”

“You really *are* idiots.” Ryoko sighed. “I guess it’s something in the Earth gene... I guess that explains Tenchi, too.”

“You’re *not* going to use your pirate powers to hurt the Earth!”

Suddenly the boy who had yelled at her before lunged forward, and Ryoko caught sight of the glitter of something shiny in his hands. Momentarily struck off guard by the suddenness of his vehement attack, she just stared at him, realising a split-second too late that it was a knife, and that he truly intended to use it to kill her. She struggled to summon her forcefield, but as she did so, a bolt of white energy flared out across the street, knocking the weapon cleanly from the boy’s hand and sending it tumbling to the ground.

Silence fell, as the crowd turned to face the newcomer. Ryoko saw Kenichi’s eyes widen with disbelief, and she found she was scarcely less surprised.

“Yume?” She murmured.

“M... Manami?” Kenichi asked uncertainly, and the droid sighed, bending to pick up the knife and glancing at it before sliding it into the belt of her clothing.

“Walking around with knives is dangerous.” She said softly. “Do you want to be on a murder charge for killing someone unprovoked?”

“How can you say it’s unprovoked?” The boy wheeled on her angrily. “Give me that back — don’t you know what she is?”

“Do *you*?” Yume challenged him, and something in her eyes made him falter. She shook her head. “You’re being stupid. Reckless. Ryoko hasn’t hurt any of you — even though you’ve thrown things at her and shouted at her and made her life stressful and complicated. She’s *never* hurt any of you... stop for a moment and think things through, will you?”

“Manami, what are you...” Kenichi faltered, and Yume cast him a glance, a flicker of regret entering her aqua eyes as she shook her head.

“My name isn’t Manami.” She said softly. “My name is Yume. And I’ve been looking for you, Kenichi-kun — because the last thing I want is for you or any of your friends to be killed doing something reckless and stupid.”

“You mean you’re... one of them?” At this juncture, Kyoda spoke up, for his friend was seemingly lost for words. “Yume... that was the

name Masaki called you! You mean... you're an alien too?"

"No. I'm not an alien." Yume shook her head. "Not exactly... I'm not like Ryoko in that respect. But my interests and hers align — I want to have a peaceful life on the Earth and so does she."

"But she's in league with people who are trying to kill us! She's involved... Nakabito said..." Kenichi found his voice at that moment, and Yume shook her head again.

"Nakabito is a fanatic who intends to destroy the Earth." She said softly. "He's not acting in your interests at all. It's all been an elaborate smokescreen to prevent you contacting Jurai and asking for their help to prevent this. He's acting in the name of his mother planet — Kanemitsu — and he believes that by destroying the Earth and making it look like Jurai are responsible, Kanemitsu will be able to steal their freedom. He is a dangerous, unbalanced man who sees no problem in sacrificing all of your lives to achieve his goal. Ryoko and her companions — me among them — have been doing our best to stop them. But it may now be too late. Nakabito has developed a powerful weapon which could destroy this planet in one blast... and we don't know if there's any way to stop it. Because of your stupidity — because of how easily you believe lies and appearances instead of how people truly are — your entire planet might yet be doomed."

A deathly hush greeted her words, and Ryoko cast her companion a glance.

"It's so bad as that?" She asked softly, and Yume nodded.

"More than." She said grimly. "Washu went to see Seguru Ishida but she doesn't think there's anything he can do, even if he does believe her case. Tenchi went with her, but even so..."

"I don't believe it." Kenichi said faintly. "Nakabito..."

"We can prove it." Yume said levelly. "Kenichi-kun, I'm sorry for deceiving you like I have. I think you're a good person at heart — you've just been misled. But I had no choice. I had to learn what I could. I love the Earth and it's my home. Just like it is Ryoko's. But all the evidence in the world won't count for anything if Nakabito is able to unleash his laser on us. It's not guaranteed that Jurai will be able to rescue us this time. After all, they've been treated like the enemy — I don't even know if any of their people or their ships have even come to assess the situation."

Another long silence, then, in a shaking voice, Kane spoke.

"You're saying there's nothing... that we can do?" He whispered,

and Yume shrugged.

“No. Probably not.” She said evenly. “Thanks to all of this, Earth’s defence shields have been compromised and they won’t be fixed in time to deflect any weapon aimed this way.”

She glanced at Ryoko.

“What do you want to do?” She asked quietly. “Ryo Ohki is still in the mountains, but...”

Ryoko was silent for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“This is my home.” She said quietly. “I’m not leaving the Earth. I’ve told Ryo Ohki she can, if she likes, but she says she’s not leaving either. This is our home, dammit. Even if there is nothing we can do — even if our magic is pathetic in comparison to some high-powered laser... we’re not running away. At least, I’m not. What about you?”

“I’m with you.” Yume told her frankly. “Even if it’s futile. If we projected forcefields... maybe...”

“It’s all we can do.” Ryoko grimaced, as one of the crowding youths let out a yell, flinging his hand up towards the sky.

“Look!” He exclaimed, panic in his voice. “Look! Something’s coming. *Something’s coming!*”

Ryoko followed the line of his finger, muttering a curse as she registered the sinister glow that had begun to glimmer around the edges of the Earth’s atmosphere.

“I guess that this is it, then.” She whispered.

“Wait a minute!” Yume grabbed her by the hand, pointing towards the tall Kouken building that loomed over them, and Ryoko frowned.

“What am I looking at?” She demanded, and Kane let out a gasp.

“*Masaki!*” He exclaimed, and Ryoko’s eyes widened as she recognised her fiancé on the balcony of the building’s uppermost floor.

“Tenchi-kun.” She murmured. “What the hell...”

“What does he think he’s doing?” Kenichi asked faintly, as the young prince stepped up to the rail, his gaze fixed firmly on the ever increasing glow in the sky. “Missile-gazing? Is he *crazy*? We’re all about to be blown up and he wants a better view?”

Ryoko’s eyes widened as she suddenly realised what was going on.

“He’s going to... Tsunami...” She whispered incoherently, and

Yume's expression became one of alarm.

"But can he? Is he... strong enough?" She demanded. "He's never... not when he's wanted to... never."

"I guess he figures there's not much to lose by testing out whether or not he can." Ryoko said grimly, although her heart lurched in her chest as she contemplated her fiancé's decision. "And as for that... I suppose we're *all* about to find out."

Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

“I guess this is it then, huh?”

As Tenchi stepped out onto the balcony of the Kouken building's executive level, he paused for a moment, casting a glance behind him at his companions as he summoned his courage for the task ahead. They were in direct contrast, he realised grimly — Seguru Ishida's eyes were wide with fear and uncertainty, whilst Washu's expression was preoccupied and resolute. Something in the scientist's determination strengthened Tenchi's own convictions and he nodded, stepping up against the railing and resting his hands on the metal bar as he gazed up towards the sky.

“Tenchi, listen to me.” Washu said softly. “This isn't a time for doubts or hesitations. If you're really determined... you need to be on top of yourself. To remember what exactly it is that Tsunami gave you, when you were born. You've used it before on instinct, but this is different. You're going to consciously have to raise the Light Hawk Wings inside of you, and use them to protect the planet... if you don't believe you can, you might as well give up now.”

“Ryoko's down there.” Tenchi murmured softly, as his gaze picked out his fiancée's distinctive appearance in amongst the milling people below. “Don't worry, Washu. I know what I have to do. It's all right... I'm ready. At least, I'll do my best. I can't do more than that.”

“Well, we both know your best is pretty impressive.” Washu admitted. “All right. Then listen carefully. There are two spaceships over the Earth at the moment. One of them is the Unko — for better or worse it seems Seiryō's come to join the party, though I imagine there's nothing much that his ship can do.”

“The Unko?” Tenchi frowned. “But this weapon is more powerful than that... correct?”

“Yes.” Washu nodded grimly. “So no matter what Seiryō does or doesn't do, he won't be able to defend the Earth from this flare. I haven't been able to make contact with him so I don't know his motivation or his plan — but I think we need to assume that he's not going to be an awful lot of use to us in the final analysis.”

“And the other ship?”

“It’s cloaked, but I’ve hacked through that mostly. I think it’s a Galaxy Police Elite ship. The ident seems to be for a craft called the Inazuma.”

“That’s... Nakabito-san’s ship.” Ishida said faintly, and Washu turned to glance at him.

“Nakabito’s?” She murmured. “You’re sure about that?”

“Positive.” Ishida’s skin was a sickly grey colour as he nodded his head. “It’s his ship.”

“Then he really *is* about to take a shot.” Tenchi murmured. “Okay, Washu. Can you tell me where he’s going to aim this thing?”

“Try a different tense, Tenchi — he’s already aimed it.” Washu said darkly. “I’m picking up a tremendous energy emission from that craft, and it’s drawing this way. I’m guessing that because he liased so closely with the people here in Osaka, he’s used Kouken Industries as his point of range — it wouldn’t surprise me if part of his reasoning for coming here was to find a definite set of coordinates to mark his aim.”

“I see it.” Tenchi’s eyes narrowed, as he registered the strange flaring glow that had suddenly begun to penetrate the sky. “Like a shooting star during the day... I see it, Washu.”

“Then there’s not much else I can do except wish you luck.” Washu said sadly. “I wish that I could, but even if I was to use my Kii power...”

“No.” Tenchi shook his head. “This isn’t for you to do, Washu. This is my planet. This is my fight. You’ve saved me enough times before... you and Ryoko both, when my magic has been unreliable or unpredictable. This time it’s my turn. You take care of Ishida-san — try and protect him if I fail. Let me do what I have to do... I believe that I’ll do this. I will!”

“Magic?” Ishida echoed unevenly, but Tenchi ignored him, stepping up to the rail as he took a final breath of air, bracing himself as he realised the light had already become more defined. An image of Ryoko flickered across his thoughts and his brows knitted together as he felt his resolve harden.

“The Earth is our home.” He murmured. “Noone is going to destroy it — not so long as I’m here! Tsunami, if you can hear me — I really need you to let me use my Light Hawk Wings for real this time. It’s important — a matter of life and death. Please.”

"It is not my magic to grant." Tsunami's voice seemed to echo out of the atmosphere, and for the briefest of instants he thought he saw the goddess, shimmering and divine as she hovered before him, reaching out a translucent hand to brush his cheek.

"The magic is yours, Tenchi Masaki Jurai. Do with it as you will — it is yours."

And as easily as she had appeared, she was gone. Half-wondering if he had hallucinated her presence completely, Tenchi gathered his wits, reflecting on her words as he brought his hands up before his face.

"Mine to do with as I see fit." He murmured. "My magic. Not Tsunami's magic. *Mine*. Is this why she gave me the Light Hawk Wings? I've always used them to protect the people around me without even thinking... but are they really here for another reason? Have I been given them... so that I can... protect the Earth?"

As this thought crossed his mind, he almost thought he felt Tsunami's flicker of agreement somewhere deep within his soul, and he narrowed his eyes, determination and conviction flooding through him as he gazed defiantly up at the oncoming laser missile. He spread his hands, focusing all of his energy on the stirring, pulsing magic that suddenly seemed to flow so freely and easily through his veins. As the sinister flare drew nearer, he tensed, closing his eyes as he felt the soft haze of something surrounding him. As he refined his focus even further, he became aware of the warm glow of three spectral blades spreading out in a wide arc from his body as they stretched further and further into the atmosphere around him.

From somewhere in the background he was aware of Ishida's gasping sob, and Washu's sharp command for the man to 'pull himself together', but the words seemed too far away for him to truly focus on as he found his entire psyche swept out of his body and onto another plane of existence entirely. He was no longer Tenchi Masaki, somehow, he realised dimly. He *was* the Light Hawk Wings, and he could almost see his own body, reflecting the divine glare of Tsunami's holy magic as the white haze of light engulfed the planet Earth completely.

"For Ryoko's sake. For my friends's sake, for the sake of everything I've grown up knowing." He muttered, as if by speaking he could confirm to himself that he was still real, and that somewhere down there, miles beneath his soaring mind he had a body by the name of Tenchi Masaki to which he would eventually return.

“I’m not going to let this guy destroy us, dammit. *I won’t let you do it, Nakabito!*”

These last words he screamed out loud, as the pulse of the teasing magic reached an almost unbearable pitch inside of him. Strange sounds rang in his ears, almost like the high-pitched wail of a banshee, and he gasped, sure that if he held on much longer, his entire being would explode into the very light he sought to control. The magic taunted him, as if trying to sever him from his grounded self entirely, but he gritted his teeth, somehow keeping it under his control, though even he did not know how he did so.

Then, in a sudden, cataclysmic burst of energy, the laser flare hit his shield, and for the briefest of instants, Tenchi felt like everything inside of him slowly exploded into light, one thing at a time. He could no longer hear anything but the disorientating screeches and when he opened his eyes, there was nothing around him but swirls of nauseating, drifting colours, knocking haphazardly into one another as they wrapped themselves deeper and deeper into his brain.

Just when he felt he could stand it no more, there was a tremendous sizzling of light on light, and then silence.

For a moment, Tenchi’s world seemed to have stopped, and he half-wondered if he had somehow lost his grip after all. That somewhere on the ground below, Tenchi Masaki had died, because he had no longer been able to exist without losing his connection to his former self.

And then, as things twisted and swayed, he felt something hard come up to meet him and with a dull jolt of pain he realised that he had not died yet. That somehow he had returned to his body, and the glittering dance of divine magic was no longer sprawling out around him in tongues of white, ghostly light.

“Tenchi?”

Someone was calling his name, and something was touching him, but Tenchi was too disorientated and drained to register either the words or the source of the contact. He lay motionless, concentrating only on bringing each breath into his lungs as he struggled to right his mind and re-align it with the body that, minutes earlier, he had been so close to discarding completely.

“Tenchi, are you all right?” The voice was clearer now, and he swallowed hard, struggling to bring the speaker into focus. A flash of red, interspersed with pinks and greens hovered over him, and he blinked, trying to understand what it meant.

“Tenchi!” Another shriek came from somewhere behind this multi-coloured swirl of human features, and somehow, something in the voice sent a jolt of electricity through Tenchi’s body, startling his shattered senses into some semblance of normality.

He struggled to move, blinking again as he realised the blur of colours had been Washu, and that the scream had come from the figure behind her. The figure who now, fear and alarm on her face, was crouching at his side, touching his cheek as she urged him to speak to her.

He parted his lips, whetting them as he struggled to form words. At last his thoughts managed to break through his body’s resistance, and he spoke.

“Ryoko.” He murmured.

At the sound of her name, the pirate’s expression became one of relief and Tenchi found himself pulled into a sitting position as she hugged him tightly.

“You are such an idiot.” She murmured, but there was nothing reproachful in her tones. “You realise what you did now, Tenchi? Flaring your magic in public like that... are you crazy?”

“I had to... do something.” Tenchi murmured, and Ryoko laughed, a strange, emotional laugh that seemed to be trying to keep back tears.

“You saved the Earth.” She whispered. “And I’m sorry I yelled at you. For a while I wasn’t sure that I’d get to tell you that... so...”

“Ryoko...” Tenchi’s senses were becoming more acute as he pieced together what she was saying, and he held her clumsily at arm’s length, eying her for a moment as he registered the mixture of emotions on her cheeky face. He smiled slightly, shrugging his shoulders.

“If people know we’re both weirdos, they won’t care that we’re together.” He managed faintly, and Ryoko laughed, shaking her head.

“I guess that’s true.” She murmured. “Tenchi... I never saw you... like that before. When I realised what you were going to do — I came up here but Washu wouldn’t let me near you. She wouldn’t let me help you. But I... I didn’t realise you were so strong as that. You really are Tsunami’s chosen Prince, aren’t you?”

“Or Earth’s.” Tenchi rubbed his temples. “I feel strange. And dizzy. And... like my energy and my sanity was pulled out of me, mixed

about a bit then shoved back in some strange order I don't understand. But I'm glad you're here, Ryoko-chan. I... I don't want us to fight about Earth or friends or anything again. Now... you don't have to protect me from people finding out my secret. I don't care if people know. I don't care if they hate me. They can hate both of us. So long as there's an Earth to live on, and you're here, I'm fine. That's all I need. Really."

"You're really a total idiot." Ryoko decided, but she hugged him tightly once more, and Tenchi knew that she was no longer angry with him. "But I love you. So you'll do."

"M... Masaki?"

At that moment, Tenchi became aware of the fact that he, Washu and the pirate were no longer alone on the balcony, and he turned his aching head with some difficulty, registering Kane in the doorway, hesitating as he stared at his friend in total disbelief. Kenichi, with Yume in tow was not far behind, and from the cacophony of sounds and sirens, Tenchi realised belatedly that his gambit had attracted a lot of attention in the bustling streets below Kouken's immense tower.

"What the hell did you do?" Kane demanded at this juncture. "What was that? What *are* you?"

"I'm Tenchi Masaki." Tenchi struggled into a sitting position, though he did not pull away from Ryoko's uncharacteristically gentle support, glad of the fact he did not have to manage his heavy body on his own. "Just as I've always been, Kyoda. Just as I always will be."

"But you... what the... that light? That... everything...?" Kenichi murmured.

"You Ishidas are prone to overreacting, aren't you?" Washu put in categorically at that point, tut-tutting under her breath as she surveyed the bemused graduate critically. "Your father passed out when he thought the thing was going to hit us, just like the coward that he is. And you can't even string a sentence together, Kenichi-san. It's quite shameful really, considering how prominent your family are. You should grow a backbone — I'd highly recommend it."

"Washu, don't be hard on them." Yume chided. "They were scared. That's all."

"Perhaps they were." Washu agreed. "But their fear almost cost them all their lives. If not for Tenchi..."

She faltered, catching the Prince's gaze, then smiling.

“You truly are as special as I thought you were, the first time I met you, Tenchi Masaki Jurai.” She murmured. “Whatever comes of this, I hope the Earth realise that they’re only still here thanks to you.”

“Masaki... *Jurai*?” Kane’s eyes widened, and he stared at his friend in disbelief. “You mean you... you’re from Jurai too? You...”

“I’m from the Earth, Kane.” Tenchi shook his head. “I was born here. My parents were both born here. I’m as much an Earthling as you or Kenichi-san or anyone else.”

“But then how...”

“My grandfather is from Jurai.” Tenchi said softly. “To be accurate, he’s a descendant of the Emperor — his eldest and only son. Through him I inherited Jurai’s power — and my connection to Tsunami, Jurai’s Goddess.”

He glanced at his hands, observing the faint scorch marks that dusted his fingertips.

“That power was Tsunami’s Light Hawk magic.” He added. “For some reason, she chose to give it to me. I kind of wonder if it was because of this... because I needed to be here to protect the Earth. But even if it wasn’t... I wanted to do it anyway. Even if you think I’m as much of an enemy as Ryoko now — I don’t care.”

“You... you stopped that thing.” Kane murmured. “Even after everything we...”

He faltered, and Ryoko sent him a pointed look.

“Your enemies aren’t always the ones who you think they are.” She said briskly. “Take a bit of advice from a pirate who knows — appearances can be deceptive. I might have a police record the length of the solar system, but I’ve never killed anyone, and I’ve served my sentence — I’ve done my time and moved on. Tenchi has the power of Jurai’s royal family inside of him, true enough, but he’s a man of the Earth and he always will be. That’s why I came here — to be here with him, on this world, where he belongs. And where I... where I felt I could belong, too. That being the case, there’s nothing that Tenchi or I won’t do to try and protect this planet. It’s home, and we want to keep it that way.”

“And the Juraian Royal Family feel similarly strongly about it, too.” Washu added briefly. “The Princesses Ayeka and Sasami spent happy times here on holiday some years ago. And they are very fond of Tenchi and Ryoko in particular. So they protect the Earth, because of that. They are not Earth’s enemies. They never will be. Not so long as

Princess Sasami wields Tsunami-kami-sama's magic."

"The Earth has a lot to learn about alien life, still." Yume said softly. "But it's okay now. There's no need to exchange more blame, Washu — thanks to Tenchi, everything is going to be all right. And now they know... maybe it's okay that way. Maybe they'll understand better, now they've seen what Jurai's power can do to protect the Earth."

"I guess that's true. I guess time will tell." Washu reflected. "All right, Yume. I know you want to redeem these idiots just as much as you were redeemed when you first settled here. I know you see the parallels, and I'll bow my head to your opinion. But it will be crazy for a while. Now that Tenchi has made it plain that he's something extraordinary, there'll be no keeping it from the Earth's media."

"Then let them come." Tenchi said firmly, meeting Ryoko's gaze and smiling as slowly she nodded her head. "No matter what happens, Washu, I'm here and I'm here to protect the Earth. I believe that now... that's why I'm here. And so long as I can, I will. If I can make people understand that... then everything will be as Yume said."

He reached across to squeeze his fiancée's hand.

"Just fine."

Miles above the Earth, hovering close to the planet's orbit, Seiryō bit his lip as he observed the bright flare of light that had suddenly spread out around the green and blue orb, shielding it with wings of protective, translucent energy. His heart skipped a beat as he registered what it was, and despite his normally grounded philosophies, he almost found himself saying a prayer of thanks to Tsunami for having bestowed a fragment of her power into one of Earth birth.

"I have never fully understood until now what power the lost Prince of Jurai truly has inside of him." He murmured, as he watched Nakabito's missile slam into the ghostly shield, flaring for a moment, then dispersing into a haze of harmless space ash.

"Even though I know the stories, and even though I have encountered his tolerance and forgiveness for the crimes long since past, I have never really understood what that boy is. But all other encounters with him simmer down to nothing compared to this. A force that nothing could stop — and yet, with the power of Tsunami — with just three wings of her divine Hawk — he has stopped it. Now

I understand why it is the Earth will never be Jurai's pawn. Not even if the Emperor so willed it — the people on that planet will always be safe, so long as Tenchi Masaki Jurai chooses to call it home."

"Incoming communication." Unko's even, metallic voice distracted his attention and he glanced at the ship's control panel, his brows knitting together as he recognised the call sign.

"The emergency transport pod." He murmured. "Damn. Okay, Unko. Fire it up — I can tell Hideki won't be happy until he speaks to me."

"Connecting now." Unko confirmed, and a haze of grey dots began to blur on the main screen into the familiar features of the fair-haired Seniwani officer.

"Well, you're alive." Came the man's brisk greeting. "I've been trying to call the Unko for a while — so I wondered. What's going on there? The reception is terrible."

"The laser missile was fired at the Earth." Seiryō said slowly. "But it's all right. Tsunami's magic... intervened."

"Tsunami?" Imaguchi looked startled, then, "Dammit, Seiryō, what happened? You look pussy-struck — what about Nakabito?"

"Ah. Yes. Nakabito." Seiryō gathered himself, shooting the officer a rueful smile. "About that..."

"You killed him, didn't you?" Imaguchi demanded, and Seiryō nodded slowly.

"Sorry." He added. "I didn't mean to. But he had his sword at my throat, and I was a bit preoccupied with the fact he'd fired the laser. It wasn't what I intended — but in the end I had to stop him some way."

"Tell me you didn't blow up the Inazuma as well."

"No... the Inazuma is here, and Nakabito doesn't seem to have detonated it himself in his death throes." Seiryō agreed. "You'll be able to go over that with a fine tooth comb."

"Well, that's something." Imaguchi sighed. "The girl?"

"Kiyone is safe here with me."

"Then that's all right." Imaguchi reflected. "Seiryō, about Nakabito's death — you do know it'll mean an official inquest, don't you?"

"When you need me, I'll come and speak at it." Seiryō said frankly.

“But Kiyone can vouch for my story. At least I think she can... she was out cold, but I think she saw the fight.”

“Well, as ever, Ryou and I will do what we can.” Imaguchi sighed. “You really are too reckless to be let out alone sometimes, though. I guess not everything changes.”

“Akihiro?”

“Ryou and I took him down. Alive.” Imaguchi said pointedly. “Ryou’s watching him right at the moment. He’s not talking — yet. But I’m going to speak to Prince Haru about borrowing some of that useful truth serum he likes so much — after all, this crime is against Jurai and they may be more inclined to speak to us now they know we’ve got our guys. Or at least, *guy*.”

“Point taken.” Seiryō said ruefully. “Sorry again.”

“We’ll take this pod to HQ and re-fuel it for you.” Imaguchi said resignedly. “When you bring the girl back here, you can collect it — we’ll make a trade. I’d rather not rendezvous while we’ve Akihiro in custody. He’s a tricky character and besides, it’s probably better you don’t see him. We want *one* suspect alive at least.”

“Okay, okay.” Seiryō held up his hands. “Then that’s what we’ll do. I’ll be bringing Kiyone that way soon anyway. Don’t tell them about Junichi till I’ve been and gone, okay? If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather go home to Jurai than spend ages answering questions right away.”

“I suppose so.” Imaguchi sighed. “All right. At least the Earth is safe. Hideki Imaguchi, over and out.”

The screen flickered to darkness, and Seiryō sighed, shaking his head.

“Guess that put me in my place.” He murmured. “I really do feel like I’m Agent Tennan again... and Hideki’s chewing me out just like old times. Even so, though, I’d like to have seen him do things differently, with so much at stake.”

“Seiryō?” Kiyone pushed back the sliding door, shielding her eyes from the still-bright haze of the explosion’s aftermath, and Seiryō cast her a glance, as she paused, a flicker of hesitation and awkwardness in her gaze.

“That light... what was it?” She asked at length, and Seiryō spread his hands.

“Tsunami-kami-sama.” He replied simply. Kiyone’s eyes widened.

“Sasami?” She asked, and Seiryō shook his head.

“Prince Tenchi.” He said softly, and Kiyone’s expression became one of understanding.

“Tenchi.” She murmured. “I see. I suppose I should have known Washu had one secret weapon in reserve... I should have expected that.”

“I think the Earth are going to be a much more potent force than anyone realises, so long as they have him to defend them.” Seiryō reflected. “In the end, Nakabito did little to aid Kanemitsu’s troubles, but he may well have assisted the people on this planet in ways he couldn’t even imagine. Their ‘primitive’ status will have to be reassessed now they’ve managed to defend themselves against such a sophisticated piece of weaponry. Perhaps all is well, after all.”

“All is well.” Kiyone echoed, and another moment of silence fell over them, as Seiryō frowned.

“You’re shivering. And your head is bleeding again.” He realised. “Let me get the first aid kit... you’re probably suffering from shock, if nothing else, and I want to make sure you don’t have any kind of concussion.”

“I...” Kiyone hesitated, then she sighed.

“Okay.” She agreed, sinking down onto an empty seat. “If... you want.”

Seiryō cast her a glance, but her expression gave no clues as to her inner thoughts, and he bit his lip, nodding his head in resignation.

“All right.” He responded. “Sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Seventeen

“There. I think the bleeding has stopped.”

Seiryō took a step back, eying his companion carefully as he glanced at the scrapes and bruises that marked her arms and body. “You were lucky, you know. It could have been a lot worse than this.”

He set his first aid implements aside, sinking down on the seat opposite her as Kiyone drew the blanket more tightly around her shoulders, meeting his gaze hesitantly.

Seiryō frowned.

“All right. Spit it out.” He said quietly.

Kiyone started, then sighed, leaning back against the wall of the spacecraft cabin.

“I’m all right, I think.” She reflected at length. “As you say, I was lucky. He didn’t have a chance to really hurt me.”

Seiryō’s eyes narrowed, and he pursed his lips.

“Are you cross with me because I killed him?” He asked softly. “Because I didn’t intend that to be the outcome. But in that situation, it’s kill or be killed... my training and my instinct both snapped into play and I did the only thing I could do — to protect both of us and to prevent him taking another pot shot at the Earth. I would have thought, as a Detective, you’d understand that — surely you’re trained to take life if it means saving many others?”

“In that situation, there was no other choice.” Kiyone shrugged her shoulders. “No. I’m not mad at you, Seiryō. Like you said, it was you or him... it’s all right.”

Seiryō fixed her with a searching gaze, and despite herself she reddened, glaring at him indignantly.

“What?” She demanded. “Someone just tried to kill me — am I not allowed to be shaken up?”

“Yes, of course you are.” Seiryō agreed. “But that doesn’t explain...”

He hesitated, then fingered his cheek, and Kiyone's cheeks flushed with even more colour as he was sure he saw a flicker of embarrassment surface in her gaze.

"It's not important." She murmured. "I guess... I'm sorry. I mean... I just... reacted, I suppose. On... instinct."

"Strange kind of instinct." Seiryō sighed. "Kiyone, I've clearly done something to annoy you, and I don't like that you're keeping it from me. Aren't you the one who told me not to bottle things up and conceal them? Would it be such a bad thing to act on your own advice?"

Kiyone chewed down on her lip, then,

"It's irrational." She admitted at length. "I... don't know that it's that important. Like I said... I just reacted. It was the heat of the moment."

She got to her feet, moving towards the door of the cabin, but Seiryō was too quick for her, reaching out to grab her around the wrist, and she turned, staring at him in consternation.

"What now?" She demanded, anger glittering in her sapphire gaze. "Seiryō, I have to radio Headquarters and let them know where I am — and what's going on! They need to know... or are you just going to leave Nakabito's corpse floating in space to rot with the wreckage of his ship?"

"I've already spoken to Hideki about that." Seiryō said softly. "While you were cleaning up. He and Ryouzuke will handle it from here. They also know you're with me, so they will make sure people know you're safe."

He frowned, eying her keenly.

"Although whether or not *I* am, with you glaring at me like that, I don't know." He added. "If you're not going to talk to me, I suppose I have no choice but to just take you back to base and hope the Commander is in a sympathetic mood. He already hates me enough as it is... and I did just bring down one of his agents."

"Nakabito was a traitor and a dangerous man."

"Yes, and in the Commander's eyes, so am I." Seiryō shrugged his shoulders, and despite herself, Kiyone faltered.

"Do you think... they will charge you... for his death?" She asked uncertainly. Seiryō shrugged.

“Nakabito’s ship was fitted with close-circuit film technology, but it all depends on whether or not it was activated, I suppose.” He reflected. “He carried out many, many interviews there, so such things were necessary. And I imagine he wanted to extract some kind of confession from either you or I... so it’s not impossible. If there is some record of what happened, I imagine I’ll be all right. If not...”

He shrugged.

“Maybe it’s time I was brought to account for my deeds before the Galaxy Police.” He admitted. “From what I’ve gleaned, most of this situation was my fault in some way or other, anyway. It might be a comfort to them if they have someone living on whom to inflict the blame.”

“That’s stupid.” Despite herself, Kiyone reacted to this, shaking her head. “You saved my life — you prevented that deluded man from cooking up any more schemes and hurting any more innocent people! And you *tried* not to kill him. I saw that, you know... I came round to see you knock his blade out of his hand, and tell him to give himself up to you. You wanted him to surrender — you only disarmed him, and he took advantage of your holding off. And you wanted to help the Earth — that’s the only reason he got his sword to your throat in the first place!”

“I seem good at getting myself into trouble with my sword.” Seiryō rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “But truthfully, Kiyone, it’s a bigger matter than that. You — Sasami-sama — everyone did so much to try and keep me out of this, because of my recent situation, but the plain fact is that I *am* to blame. For stirring resentment in Nakabito’s heart, no doubt — he always did hate and envy me, ever since we were young men. For allowing myself under Tokimi’s spell, and creating paranoia on the Earth by making them aware of alien life in the first place.”

He cast her a sidelong glance.

“For involving you, because you are my friend.” He added. “At least... before today, you were. Right now, I’m finding it harder to know for sure.”

“Of course I am, you idiot.”

“Then why are you mad at me?” Seiryō asked baldly. “And why did you slap me? It’s an original way of thanking someone who saves your life — is that something unique to your planet that I don’t know about?”

“No.” Kiyone admitted, her cheeks flushing red again as she shook her head. “No, it wasn’t... it wasn’t like that.”

She sighed, sinking back down onto the seat.

“And I won’t let them charge you with anything, if I can prevent it.” She added. “I wanted to keep you out of it, because you had enough to deal with already and because you’ve suffered enough from those things in the past, anyway. You’ve more than been punished for what Tokimi did to you. I’m willing to testify again — but on your behalf, this time. Don’t worry. I doubt that Jurai’s Emperor will let anything befall his niece’s chief advisor. After all, Sasami’s name was brought into all of this, and in her defence, you are authorised to kill. Aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Seiryō nodded. “I suppose we’ll see. Hideki said he and Ryouzuke would do what they could on my behalf, too — and that with it being a crime against Jurai, they were going to try and involve Prince Haru and his truth serum to extract the full story. In this case, the truth can only help me... so I’m not overly worried about consequences.”

He shrugged.

“It’s somewhat shameful to admit, but I feel very little about it either way.” He admitted. “I did not want to slay him. But even when he was dying, his concern was with destroying innocent life. I took *his* life, and I wish I had not had to. But if I had to choose between his and yours — between his and Washu’s, or his and the people of Earth — in that light, it was no different from any of the pirates or miscreants I fought and brought down at sword-point when I was operating as an Elite. He killed any guilt inside of me when he spoke so coldly about those people he still cared more about killing than he did his own life.”

He frowned.

“And you’re not wrong.” He concluded. “I’m sure that if it comes to a Tribunal, the worst they can do is exile me from the Galaxy Police. And I’m already exiled. They would not dare put a Tennan to death, not considering my patrons... unjust as it may be, it’s true. So I am not afraid, Kiyone, nor am I overcome with remorse. I did what was necessary and I’m sure that even your Commander will come to see that... you shouldn’t worry so much on my behalf.”

“I guess.” Kiyone rubbed her temples.

“And about the slap?”

Kiyone flinched, glancing up at him guiltily.

“You’re not going to let that go, are you?” She asked, and Seiryō shook his head.

“No.” He said frankly. “I’ve known you to do some crazy things during our acquaintance, but this one bewilders me the most of all of them.”

Kiyone sighed.

“It was... because of what Nakabito said. And... and Agents Takamura and Imaguchi.” She said slowly. “And... and Mitsuru-sama said the same thing, too. It was... from so many places, I had to... to accept that it was true.”

“That what was true?” Seiryō looked foxed. “I may be an Encryption expert, but you’re speaking in tongues!”

Kiyone sighed again.

“About Yuriko.” She said carefully. “And... the others.”

“Yuriko?” Seiryō looked blank. “Who or what is Yuriko?”

Kiyone’s eyes widened.

“Don’t you even remember?” She demanded. “Seiryō!”

“Not off hand.” Seiryō’s brow furrowed. “Care to enlighten me?”

Kiyone looked exasperated.

“Yuriko.” She repeated. “Nakabito’s fiancée, when you were at the Academy. The woman you stole away from him, then ditched without a second thought.”

Seiryō stared at her in stricken silence, and Kiyone nodded.

“Now you remember, huh?” She said softly. “I can’t believe that after all of that, you just forgot about her. You know that’s why he bore you such a grudge for so long? Because of you, Yuriko quit the Galaxy Police Academy. And because she went back to Seniwa, she was killed in a fire there. He loved her and he lost her. You’re my friend, Seiryō, but that kind of behaviour makes me angry. You have no idea how women feel about things — don’t you realise that she fell in love with you, and you broke her heart, too? She gave up a blossoming career, all her potential — because she couldn’t stand being around you. And Nakabito, no matter what he did... he couldn’t bring her back.”

She bit her lip, then,

“And she wasn’t the only one, was she?” She added quietly, as her friend’s heart skipped a beat. “Of all people, I never imagined such things of you.”

Seiryō was silent for a moment. Then he buried his head in his hands, muttering a curse.

“You have been digging into my past rather a lot of late.” He murmured softly. “Some things are better left unburied.”

“So that’s your answer to it? Those girls’ feelings you hurt... and it just doesn’t matter to you?”

“It didn’t.” Seiryō lifted his teal eyes to her blue ones, reticence glittering in their depths. “But it was a long time ago. Things change.”

“You didn’t even remember her name.”

“No. I don’t suppose that it mattered to me to do so.” Seiryō admitted. “Kiyone, I was eighteen years old. Do you mean to say that when you were eighteen you never did anything reckless?”

“I solved my brother’s murder.” Kiyone said softly. “I was entirely focused on the Galaxy Police. On my future there — on the things I’d worked so hard to achieve. And I can only imagine what kind of things that girl — all those girls — must have been feeling, to have been treated so coldly. Women aren’t just things there for your — or anyone’s — convenience, you know. They’re people too.”

Seiryō got to his feet, moving across the chamber towards the porthole as he digested her words.

“I know that.” He murmured. “I’m not completely stupid.”

“But see, that’s the thing I’m having trouble with.” Kiyone responded. “Because you’re a smart guy. You seem to have a pretty good grasp of other people, and their motives and actions. If you were the kind of man who was oblivious, I’d at least have some grounds to justify it. But you’re not. It’s like... you knew, but you didn’t care. And did it anyway. That’s what I’m finding difficult... to reason out in my own mind. Equating the you I thought I knew with... that Seiryō Tennan. That’s all.”

“There probably is very little comparison.” Seiryō admitted, turning back towards her and leaning up against the wall as he folded his hands across his chest. “As I said, I was eighteen years old. Now I’m almost thirty. And besides...”

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

“There were not as many women as you’ve been led to believe.” He added. “People do like to sensationalise. Undoubtedly, I acted in a shameful way where some were concerned — I’m not going to try and plead innocence. And I probably compound the sin by not clearly remembering one from the other. But... I was a different person, then. You have to try and understand... how things were. Then.”

“You can’t justify treating women like trash, Seiryō.”

“Probably not.” Seiryō admitted. “But I can try to explain it to you, at the very least.”

Kiyone’s lips thinned, but she made no objection, and Seiryō sighed.

“I was sent to the Galaxy Police because I had an argument with my father.” He said. “You know that. It was punishment. Punishment for discovering his dark secrets — his vices. His women, his gambling, the finances of the Tennan family. I was old enough to challenge them and his position within the Council. He felt threatened. So he sent me away.”

He frowned, remembering the violent exchange of words.

“I hated him so much, then.” He reflected. “More than I’d hated anyone, ever. I think... maybe, if I’d have had my sword when we argued, I might have caused him some harm. That’s how angry I was. And so I entered the Galaxy Police Elite Program.”

He glanced at his hands, looking rueful.

“I had never been in a position where I did not have to live up to the Tennan name, or fit in with the conventions and restrictions of Juraian high society.” He murmured. “I did have an elevated opinion of what being such a high-born son meant, but in some respects, I allowed it to take me off the rails. I’d been raised with the perception that Jurai were superior and therefore I was superior... this is, probably, the way in which I was acting. Also, my pride was hurt, too. I don’t believe I spent too much time considering the feelings of my classmates. I was far too immersed in my own grievances.”

He chewed on his lip as he considered how best to phrase the next part.

“I did not realise how much I’d come to mirror my father’s own shameful acts until Kuramitsu-sensei took me in hand and clarified my view of what being an officer of the Elite could mean.” He admitted at length. “When I understood — when I saw the parallel — I stopped. I had nothing more to do with any woman at the Academy, and I have

not done such things since. The excesses of my youth may be unforgiveable, but they were short-lived. And Nakabito and I did cross swords over a woman, I remember it now. But I did not, by any means, take advantage of all of the Elite Corps's female applicants. And I am not... I am not my father's son."

He closed his eyes briefly.

"At least, I *hope* I'm not." He amended. "Although I can understand it, if you think that I am. The truth is, though, that you came to know me after my experiences with Kii magic. Before then, I may not have been interested in taking mistresses or risking my reputation, but I doubt that I had much consideration for anything outside the needs of myself and, at a stretch, my family. My father's death occurred because of my careless, selfish behaviour, and so did everything that followed it. But Tokimi... Tokimi's magic, Tokimi's presence..."

He faltered, glancing at his companion as she absorbed all of this carefully.

"I would never be able to act that way now without feeling the woman's pain." He said honestly. "I am not the man I was eleven years ago, Kiyone. You did not know that man, and I'm glad that you did not. I have no other defence than that — but at least now you know the circumstances, as best as I can explain them."

He shrugged.

"Probably, I deserved the slap." He added.

"It shouldn't really matter to me either way." Kiyone sighed, running her fingers through her thick dark hair. "I mean, we are friends. And like you said, I didn't know you then. I'm not so stupid as to not know people change — and I know you especially have changed. I've spoken to Suki, and other people — and I encountered you somewhat before. You had a fearsome reputation, as a cold, incisive, sarcastic Agent who got the job done, but who didn't waste time on niceties. And that was the impression I got of you, the very first time we met. I couldn't have pictured you and I becoming friends the way we have done — or imagined that this person really did live inside that one. Even so, though..."

She trailed off, frowning.

"I feel bad for the girl. Yuriko." She admitted. "And that you... you don't even remember her name."

Seiryō held up his hands.

“I’m sorry.” He responded. “From this conversation, perhaps I do recall her face. But no... the name Yuriko means nothing to me. It was too long ago.”

He sent her a glance, a pang of something twisting up inside his heart as he gauged her expression.

“I was not capable of loving anyone, then, not truly.” He added softly. “I hated too much... resented too much. But recovering from Tokimi’s spell taught me the value of other things — Suki’s patience and support, and then Tokimi herself... brought out something that I’d not felt or been before. Washu said that I’m still the same person I was then — she doesn’t see any difference in me now than she did before. However, she says that I’m more in balance than I was — that I’ve learnt to harness the negative traits and stop them from controlling my actions so greatly.”

He grimaced.

“In a lot of ways, I inherited my father’s nature.” He admitted, a pained look touching his teal eyes. “I have always tried so hard not to be like him, but Kiyone, I am like him. Suki inherited mother’s kindness and understanding. I... I had Father’s ambition and greed. They are cruel masters — even now I am probably as selfish as I was when first we met. Arrogant, too. Such is the curse of being Seiji Tennan’s son — he is dead and gone, but I cannot erase him so easily from my life.”

“You said your carelessness led to his death.” Kiyone said thoughtfully. “What did you mean?”

“That’s something I can’t answer.” Seiryō looked regretful. “I didn’t murder him — even if I did consider doing it at one point. But... at the end of the day, it was... probably my fault he died. No. Definitely my fault. That’s why I didn’t want to kill Nakabito if I could avoid it. Unfortunately... he made up my mind for me.”

He bit his lip.

“On reflection, I’m not sure why you spend any time with me at all, you know.” He said ironically. “On review, in your eyes, I must seem a pretty despicable individual. Why go to such lengths to help me, Kiyone? You have been kind — especially coming when Mother passed on. Why?”

“Because we’re friends.” Kiyone said frankly. “Even if you are an arrogant, stupid idiot sometimes.”

Seiryō’s teal eyes clouded and for a moment he just gazed at her,

his expression unreadable. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“I have a lot to learn still about what it means to have unconditional friendship.” He reflected, and at this, Kiyone smiled.

“You came to my rescue.” She reminded him. “And you put yourself at risk over me, even though you’ve had so much to handle yourself since Kaede-sama died.”

“Yes... but that was selfish too.” Seiryō sighed. “I admit, it was entirely selfish.”

“How so?” Kiyone stared, confused. “How can it be selfish, to save someone’s life at the risk of your own?”

Seiryō hesitated, then he met her gaze, seriousness in the depths of his teal gaze.

“Because I couldn’t live with the idea of you not being around.” He confessed. “I did not want you to die — and disappear from my life, the way Mother has. I could do nothing to save her and I felt useless because of that. I was determined... I would not let the same thing happen to you. So I came... because you were in trouble. It was selfish, Kiyone — I did not want you to die, because I wanted to keep you.”

“To... keep me?” Kiyone blinked, and Seiryō looked rueful.

“In a manner of speaking.” He amended. “Yes. So you see... it’s not so noble an act after all, is it?”

“I suppose few people act truly unselfishly.” Kiyone murmured. “But you know, even if that is true — you still did it to save me. So it was for my sake, as well as your own. Wasn’t it?”

“Perhaps.” Seiryō admitted. “The truth is, I’ve never had a friend like you in my life before. To shed tears in front of you... I couldn’t have imagined ever doing that, not even before Suki. And yet...”

“You needed to do that.” Kiyone told him firmly. “It probably wouldn’t hurt you to do it more, in fact... you bottle things up inside of you far too much. You need to show your feelings from time to time — then people would understand you better.”

“Some feelings are better off inside.” Seiryō said darkly, and Kiyone stared.

“Seiryō?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Seiryō shook his head. “And it’s growing later. Do you want me to take you back to Headquarters, or...?”

“Right now, I want you to tell me what you meant by your last remark.” Kiyone shook her head. “You’re doing that infuriating thing again where you shut yourself off and try and change the subject. It’s not good for you — especially not with Kaede-sama still so much on your mind. I know you’re grieving, Seiryō — there’s nothing weak about admitting it, or sharing those things.”

“It’s not about Mother.” Seiryō said quietly. “Her death has complicated it, true enough. But I was not thinking of her.”

“What, then?”

“If I told you, you would likely not believe me.” Seiryō cast her a troubled glance. “Especially considering our conversation this evening. And if you did...”

He shook his head.

“I might lose your friendship.” He concluded. “I am not willing to risk that.”

“Lose my...?” Kiyone’s brow furrowed. “You didn’t kill someone else I don’t know about, did you?”

“Not unless I’ve taken to doing it in my sleep.” Seiryō shook his head ruefully. “Let it alone, Kiyone. Really. Sasami-sama once told me of a legend they have on the Earth that seems relevant to this — in your time living there, did you never hear the tale of Pandora’s Box?”

“Many times, but I’ve always believed in opening the box.” Kiyone said evenly. “Because for all the bad that comes out, there’s always that little bit of good in the bottom that makes it worth it.”

Seiryō faltered at this, staring at her uncertainly, and she grinned.

“Well?” She demanded. “I’m a detective. Digging for truth is what I do. And you look like you need to unburden something to someone, you know. It’s been a stressful couple of weeks for you — if you can’t trust me, who can you trust?”

“I do trust you.” Seiryō admitted, sinking back down into his vacant seat. “I just... I’m not used to dealing with this. That’s all.”

“With what?” Kiyone pressed gently. “Come on — if you trust me, you can tell me anything.”

Seiryō was silent for a long while. Then, at length, he met her gaze with an apprehensive one of his own.

“I’m in love with you.” He said softly, and Kiyone’s eyes opened wide with disbelief, her jaw dropping as she struggled to digest his

words. He smiled resignedly, spreading his hands. "See? I said you wouldn't believe me."

"You're playing with me." Kiyone gathered her wits, shooting him an accusing look. "Because I slapped you. You..."

She faltered, as Seiryō shook his head.

"I wish I was." He admitted. "But the more I fight it, the more true it becomes. If you don't believe me, you can ask Tokimi. She's seen it within me... I have tried to lie to myself about it for long enough, but I can't lie to her."

"Seiryō..." Kiyone hesitated, then, "Listen. You lost your mother, and we both know..."

"It's not because of Mother." Seiryō said simply. "It was there before that. I first realised it when we returned from Rikishouki — after you and Tokimi saved my life. But I think it may have been there longer than that — simmering inside of me. Punishing me, perhaps, for being so callous with those other women. I have never believed in divine intervention, but it seems a fitting cruelty, to make me feel the things that maybe they felt, when I discarded them so easily."

He buried his head in his hands.

"I understand how futile it is." He added sadly. "That we are friends, but that is all. We are both independant people, we come from different worlds. And I... I once tried to take your life. I know I... don't have any right to feel this way — At the moment I'm as ashamed of myself and my past actions as I could possibly be, and that's no lie. But even though I say that — even though I *know* that... I cannot fight feeling it. And I came to rescue you because I could not bear to lose someone else I loved... not so soon."

Kiyone eyed him for a moment, then she sighed.

"I didn't see that coming." She admitted. "I'm not sure... how to even respond to it, to be honest with you."

"So let us forget it and change the subject." Seiryō suggested. "Before I manage to further humiliate myself in front of you."

"No..." Kiyone shook her head, biting her lip as she considered. "No, I don't think that would work. It's as you said — Pandora's box is open, and it can't be shut again. But..."

"But?" Seiryō arched an eyebrow. "You can find some good in this?"

“Perhaps.” Kiyone sighed again. “You’re a confusing person to be around, sometimes. Infuriating, often. You get me riled up in ways noone ever has, except maybe Mihoshi and she’s practically a professional at being irritating. And when this happened...”

She pursed her lips.

“I was really angry when I found out about what happened at the Galaxy Police Academy.” She owned. “About Yuriko and the other girls. It made me mad — it made me really upset with you. And with me, because I felt I’d misjudged you. I’d thought you were a better man — but in truth, I think... perhaps... I was a little jealous, too.”

“Jealous?” Seiryō’s head shot up at this, incredulity glittering in his gaze. “Why on earth...?”

“Therein lies the question.” Kiyone shrugged helplessly. “Why should I be? Strange, isn’t it?”

She offered him a wry smile.

“And right now, I should be... I don’t know. Freaking out. Laughing. Crying. Something.” She acknowledged. “A Lord of Jurai just confessed his feelings to me... in a way I never imagined would happen. And... and by rights I should be screaming, or yelling at you, or telling you to get real...”

“Well, you haven’t got to that point yet. Give it some time for the shock to sink in.” Despite himself, irony flickered in Seiryō’s expression, and Kiyone smiled ruefully.

“Truth is, I... don’t think I will.” She admitted honestly. “It... it’s a shock, I won’t lie about that. A huge one, and I never saw it coming. But... when you said it... you know... it wasn’t just a shock. It wasn’t just all the bad stuff coming out of Pandora’s box. It was... a little bit of the good, as well.”

“What are you babbling about now?” Seiryō sent her a wary look, and Kiyone shrugged, her cheeks pinkening.

“I guess I was a little relieved.” She admitted awkwardly. “That I meant that much to you.”

“What?” Seiryō’s eyes almost fell out of his head, and Kiyone laughed, shaking her head.

“Your expression is truly priceless.” She observed absently. “But... you’ve been honest with me, with your true feelings. And I... haven’t even been honest with myself about mine. But... but sooner or later, I guess, they’d have got to a point where I’d not have been able to

ignore them. And then..."

She spread her hands.

"I probably would have pulled back." She admitted. "Felt it was ridiculous... or just run away from it completely. That's what I do, after all. Remember? I don't go home because it reminds me of Kei. And I'd have probably pulled away from you, too, because... I wouldn't know how to handle the situation any more. And I guess at the end of the day, you are stronger than me. You're not the coward I am."

"Kiyone..." Seiryō struggled to gather his wits. "Your... feelings? You mean..."

"I can't pinpoint it." Kiyone looked embarrassed. "But I was so angry, about Yuriko and the others. And even more angry when I knew you were being targeted. I wanted to protect you, and I told myself it was because you were grieving... and because we were friends. But I guess I'm selfish too... I guess I did it because I love you, and I... I didn't want to have to see you hurt, either. Because when you hurt... I... I hurt too."

She flushed, burying her head in her hands.

"This is awkward." She admitted. "And as you said, we come from so different worlds. I don't... aspire to being anything to a Lord of Jurai. It's never been about that. I just... sometimes you can't help it."

Seiryō gathered himself hurriedly, standing and pulling her to her feet, slipping his hand under her chin as he raised her gaze to his once more.

"Are you serious, or just humouring me?" He asked softly. "Because if it's the latter, Kiyone, stop it now. I can't... deal with being teased. Not where this is concerned."

"I'm not teasing you." Kiyone assured him. "I've told you the truth."

Seiryō closed his eyes briefly, as a strange, half-giddy feeling washed through him. For a moment he let it take control of his body, then he forced it back, meeting her gaze once again.

"Even though you saw me kill a man?"

"He would have killed you." Kiyone said evenly. "I've done the training, Seiryō. I know the kill or be killed clause as well as you do. In defence of the Earth, in defence of a fellow officer, it's not murder. If anything, protecting the Earth at this cost is penance for your attack on the town there under Tokimi's influence. So don't worry about

that... I was there, remember. I saw what happened and I know you didn't try to kill him."

"And even though you know now what a rogue I was in my youth?"

"You're not eighteen now." Kiyone reminded him. "As you said yourself. And I... I suppose I knew that, anyway. That you were different, I mean. Now. That this you — the you I made friends with — would never act that way."

"But... such different worlds..." Seiryō sighed, and Kiyone shook her head.

"Therein lies the trouble." She whispered, and Seiryō nodded.

"I have fought it so hard for this reason." He admitted. "I did not imagine you returned any of it, and besides, I did not... want to make your life complicated. I know how I am viewed at Headquarters, and I know how important your career is to you."

"And you don't think Jurai's court would have something to say about Sasami's advisor if he went after a low-born officer of the Galaxy Police?" Kiyone pointed out, and Seiryō snorted.

"Do you really think I'd care what they thought?" He demanded derisively. "Most of them share braincells. I have no time for their antics or their idiocy... you are far better to me than any of them. If that's your concern, Kiyone, put it out of your head right now. You're the one who comforted me when Mother died, remember? You were the one who helped me rescue Tokimi from Rikishouki. There is no one on Jurai outside of my family and Lady Sasami whose opinion matters to me overly — I would even stand the Emperor's disapproval. But in terms of *your* position..."

"I'm not in the habit of letting the Commander live my life for me." Kiyone said frankly. "I let my quality of work speak for itself."

"Yes, I should have seen that answer coming." Seiryō admitted. He held her at arm's length, eying her keenly.

"Well, Detective Makibi? How should we proceed?" He asked quietly. Kiyone sighed.

"How can we?" She asked with a sigh. "Right now we both say and think one thing, but when we've had time to rationalise it... would it hurt more to ignore it, or to pursue it and fail?"

"I don't really believe in failing." Seiryō reflected. "Not if it's something important to me."

“Seiryō...”

“I won’t pretend I’m not afraid.” Seiryō eyed her ruefully. “I am. Terrified. I’ve never opened myself up to anyone like I have you... not even Suki, I don’t believe. And the risk... of betrayal, of pain, of feeling all those things I’ve never allowed myself close enough to a woman to feel... frightens me more than anything. More than facing Nakabito in a combat with blades.”

He sent her a wry smile.

“At least that I have had training for.” He reflected. “This is something completely new.”

“For me too.” Kiyone admitted. “Since Kei died, I suppose... I felt I was repaying something, by focusing so much on my career. Whenever I’d think about straying, I’d remember him and feel guilty. He believed in me doing this, after all... to the point he even helped me forge my papers to get into the Academy in the first place. So...”

“Forge your..?” Seiryō stared at her, and Kiyone laughed ruefully.

“You aren’t the only one who doesn’t believe in failure.” She admitted sheepishly. “I wanted it, but Mother and Father couldn’t afford the training and didn’t see the point. So I took things into my own hands. A classmate of mine from school on Tanima had been enrolled but she didn’t want to go — she had some guy she wanted to run off with, and we cut a deal. I went to the Academy in her place... under her name. And Kei helped me to pull it off — even then he had the right contacts to do it.”

Seiryō stared.

“Does the Commander know that?” he demanded. “Or are you not even really Kiyone Makibi?”

Kiyone laughed.

“Oh, I’m Kiyone Makibi all right.” She said ruefully. “Believe me. Mihoshi was acquainted with the family of the girl I switched with, and she — in her usual, cunning way — managed to blow my cover. But by this time, almost the whole of the first semester had passed and they didn’t want to let me go so easily. So I made an arrangement with them that I’d continue under my own name, and earn my place by working after hours in various mundane jobs to make up the fee money.”

“I see.” Seiryō eyed her keenly. “You know, maybe there is a similarity between us, after all. I had no idea you were quite that

devious.”

“Like you, I suppose if I want something, I’ll go the extra mile.” Kiyone admitted.

“So in that case, you’re not going to run away from me just yet, are you?” Seiryō asked.

“Seiryō...”

“My emotions are already as raw as they can possibly be.” Seiryō looked rueful. “With Mother, with this — I’m as vulnerable as I’ve ever been. But I *do* love you, Kiyone. And I’m not going to try and hide it from you any more. If you do... feel the way you say you do, and if we are at all alike — are you going to try and put space between us?”

“There’s no logic in you and I being together, you know.” Kiyone pointed out, and Seiryō grinned.

“Who cares about logic.” He said softly, brushing stray wisps of dark hair from her face. “I’m trying a new philosophy. It’s called appreciating the things around you — and not letting them slip away.”

With that, he bent his head to hers, kissing her gently on the lips. At first tentative, the embrace deepened as Kiyone submitted to his gesture and he slipped his hands around her shoulders, holding her tightly as he felt her heart pounding against her ribs. At length they parted, and he offered her a quizzical smile.

“Well?” he murmured. “What do you think?”

“Oh, I hate you.” Kiyone sighed, sinking back against him. “I shouldn’t have let you do that, if I thought I was going to be able to step away. You might not be a womaniser these days, Seiryō, but you know how to screw with a girl’s heart. Of course I don’t want to go anywhere now... it’s a low blow.”

“Good.” Seiryō was unrepentant. “Then lets see where it leads us, all right? I’m in the right frame of mine at the moment to throw caution to the winds, and I know that’s unadvisable. But I don’t want you to slip through my fingers, and I’m determined I won’t let you. Have you submitted — or do I have to persuade you further?”

“All right. I give. I’ll come quietly.” Kiyone held up her hands in mock surrender. “When this all sinks in, I’ll probably do the freaking out I mentioned earlier. But... if there is a little bit of good in this Pandora’s box, I... I’d quite like to capitalise on it, too. I’ve never felt

like this either, but I don't dislike feeling it. And it might be crazy, but..."

"But if we both feel like we do, it can't be wrong." Seiryō said evenly. "Can it?"

"I don't even want to answer that question." Kiyone said ruefully, and Seiryō laughed, slipping his fingers into hers and squeezing her hands gently.

"I see." He observed, amused. "Tactical as ever."

"Yes." Kiyone agreed. "All right. But... but for now... it's just between us. All right? If Mihoshi guessed at it, it'd be all over Headquarters, and until I've got my head around it, I don't want to have to defend how I feel to anyone. And you... whatever you say, if you do need the Emperor's goodwill to avoid any kind of retribution over Nakabito, it wouldn't good for him to find out either, would it? If we're going to... to even attempt this, for the time being, it has to be... a secret. Until the both of us really understand what we're doing."

"Do people in love ever understand what they're doing?" Seiryō murmured. "Doesn't seem so to me."

"Seiryō..."

"If that's how you feel, I won't fight you." Seiryō spread his hands. "If those are the terms, Detective, I submit to them wholeheartedly."

He grinned.

"Although you won't be able to keep it from Tokimi." He added. "She reads me far too easily. She knows me too well and we're connected — she picks up every change in my emotion and my demeanour as if it were her own... I won't be able to hide it from her."

"You said that before. That Tokimi knew how you felt without you telling her." Kiyone's eyes narrowed. "Hang on — do you mean, then, that when I came to Jurai — when she said all that about knowing I could help you — that she knew all of this but didn't even drop a hint about it?"

"I made her promise not to." Seiryō agreed. "And she keeps her word."

"She's... more sneaky than I thought."

"She's easy to underestimate, sometimes." Seiryō admitted. "But if

she was to know... this, Kiyone, she wouldn't tell anyone. Not if I asked her not to. And I don't think... I'll keep it from her. I don't exactly choose to open up to her. It's just there, because of her Kii sight."

"I guess I can trust Tokimi." Kiyone sighed. "Maybe that's why she's taken to calling me Neesan. Maybe she was dropping hints all along, and I was just too dense to figure it out."

"I wouldn't put it past her." Seiryō owned ruefully. "Sometimes I think I'm looking after her... but other times she seems far more perceptive than I am to how things are. Perhaps she's been taking care of me, too — I just didn't really realise it."

He glanced at the control panel.

"I should take you home." He murmured, and Kiyone frowned, nodding her head.

"I guess you should." She agreed, and Seiryō stared at her, aware of the faint reticence in her tone. He shook his head slowly.

"No." He said softly. "I *will* take you home. We've both had a traumatic day — I have no idea what it was like being Nakabito's captive, Kiyone, but I don't ever again want to feel as helpless as I did when I discovered you were in his custody. We're both emotional and we're throwing things out that should be discussed properly when we're more rational."

"You're right." Kiyone agreed with a sigh. "When we're rational."

She pinkened.

"So as you know, I wasn't thinking... along the lines of doing something reckless or rash." She added. "I just... I feel like going back to Headquarters... it does feel like we've got a lot to settle and I... I suppose I want to clarify that. But you're right. Now... is not the best time."

"We'll just have to arrange another rendezvous, then." Seiryō said simply. He turned towards the ship's control panel.

"Unko, auto-pilot manual override. Plot new coordinates — head to base zero zero one. Full speed."

"Coordinates accepted, base zero zero one. Destination, Galaxy Police Headquarters." Unko responded, and Kiyone started, staring up at him in surprise.

"I didn't know your ship could speak!"

“She’s just an artificially enhanced computer system.” Seiryō eyed her keenly. “Why? Many sophisticated spacecrafts have a vocal communication unit.”

He shrugged.

“It’s lonely, travelling in space a lot on your own.” He admitted sheepishly. “So when I had her built, I decided it would be as well to have the option. I never activate the unit unless I am on my own — I guess it was sort of a personal partnership between my ship and I, when I was working as a lone wolf agent for the Elite. We made a good team. That’s all — to be honest, I prefer to give her instructions verbally than I do via the control panel. It seems more natural somehow, for a Lord of Jurai to be barking orders, don’t you think?”

“I guess that’s true.” Kiyone pursed her lips, looking sheepish. “She’s not sentient... then? It’s just... a machine?”

“Just a machine, albeit a technically advanced one.” Seiryō looked bewildered. “Why does that matter?”

“It doesn’t.” Kiyone flushed red. “I just... for a moment it felt like... someone was... watching us. You know. And... it... it’s kind of... not something I want to be... be watched doing just yet. That’s all.”

“Kiyone...” Seiryō’s eyes widened, then he laughed, slipping his arm around her shoulders and hugging her tightly as he felt the last of the tension seep out of his body. “Don’t worry. Unko isn’t interested in you or in anything except following the commands I give her. Believe me — there’s just the two of us here... though if it unnerves you so much, I’ll deactivate her vocal unit and fly her the traditional way instead.”

“No... it’s all right.” Kiyone shook her head, embarrassment in her blue eyes. “Let her do what she was programmed to do. If you’re going to dump me on the doorstep of HQ to face a pile of questions from my Commander about what the hell’s been going on, the least you can do is be a good host and make me something to drink while we fly.”

“You’re going to nag me just as much now as you did before, aren’t you?” Seiryō realised. Kiyone nodded, as the normal colour began to return to her cheeks.

“You better believe I am.” She agreed lightly. “Besides, Lords of Jurai are meant to have good manners. Isn’t that true?”

“I suppose it is, although in practice many of us fall short.” Seiryō eyed her in amusement. “Still, a drink would not be unwelcome. After

the night we've had — and in consideration of the red tape to come regarding Nakabito's demise... I think taking advantage of a brief lull is a good idea. As you rightly observe, Unko knows her route back to Headquarters as well as any ship that ever docked at the Galaxy Police bay. She doesn't need my help to find her way."

"Then I'll make use of you instead." Kiyone glanced at him, and Seiryō's teal gaze softened at the look in her eyes. He nodded.

"Whatever you want." He said softly. "I'm all yours."

Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen

So, he had got home somehow.

Tenchi rubbed his eyes, glancing around him with a mixture of confusion and relief as he registered the familiarity of his surroundings. His own bedroom walls surrounded him, as if protecting him from the swarm of media attention he knew would now be coming his way, and he sighed, letting out his breath in a slow exhale as he turned his mind back to the events in the city.

Now that it was over, it was mostly a blur in his mind, and although he had clearly felt the flare of magic within him at the time, it now seemed both crazy and impossible that he alone had wielded such power and had deflected a blast hell-bent on destroying the Earth.

“But somehow, I did.” He murmured, staring up at the ceiling as he ran his gaze absently over the familiar grooves in the plastering. “I protected everyone. Not Tsunami’s magic, but mine... my own magic, like Ryoko has hers, and Washu has hers. Has it always been that way? Or has Tsunami been grooming me up for something like this? I guess I’ll never know for sure... but either way, I’m glad that everything worked out all right.”

He pushed back his covers, clambering out of bed as he padded over to the window. A blank space greeted him and he hesitated, staring uncertainly out at the place where he was sure, only the day before, the mountain landscape had been.

“What the...?” He murmured, turning back towards the bed as he wondered whether or not it was a dream. As he did so, however, he caught sight of a sheet of notepaper lying on the bedside cabinet, held down with a distinctive crab-shaped paperweight, and as he squinted at it, he could make out the message in Washu’s cursive script.

“Stay here and recuperate.” It said. *“Let me handle everything else.”*

“I wonder what she means by handling.” Tenchi sank back down onto his bed, pursing his lips. “And what else? The media? Jurai? I wonder how much red tape I’ve generated through all of this. Noone is going to ever leave the Masaki family alone now... we’re well and truly outed.”

“That’s not necessarily a bad thing, you know, Tenchi-kun.”

His fiancée’s voice made him start, and he swung around, a smile touching his lips as he registered her presence in the doorway. He beckoned for her to join him, and was rewarded by a playful smile as the pirate dropped gracefully down onto the end of his bed, crossing her legs as she cast him a searching look.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired, a little confused... but mostly tired.” Tenchi admitted. “Where are we, Ryoko? I thought this was my room — but if it is... what’s outside?”

“This is your room.” Ryoko’s smile widened, and she reached over to squeeze his fingers. “Washu just shielded the house in some kind of interdimensional warp for a while. She said that it would prevent anyone disturbing you while you slept — though you were so gone I think that they could’ve sent another laser missile and it wouldn’t have woken you.”

“I don’t know about that.” Tenchi grinned at this, shrugging his shoulders ruefully. “I think I’d know. I really feel like I was out there to protect this planet, earlier on. I don’t remember much clearly — I felt like I was being ripped out of my body and stretched across time and space, to be honest. But it was like the impulse to protect the Earth was more important than anything else. I think that’s why I have the Light Hawk Wings. And why I’m here.”

“That’s kinda deep.” Ryoko eyed him pensively. “And what about the fact everyone knows? Did you mean what you said back in Osaka? About not caring what people think about you now?”

“Yes.” Tenchi agreed. “I told you. This is my home, and you’re the person I want to share it with. Nothing else is so important to me as that.”

He hesitated, then,

“I’m sorry if I made you think otherwise.” He admitted. “I should have listened a little more clearly when you told me about Kane.”

“Yes, you should, but I’ve decided I’ll forgive you.” Ryoko said reflectively. “This time. Just be careful — I might not, next time.”

“All right... I’ll remember.” Tenchi’s eyes sparkled with relief. “Washu said that you were more easily hurt than I realised — that you’d begun to feel like an outsider here and I don’t want that. I want you to feel this is your home — but if you can’t feel that way... I... I

still want us to be together. Whatever and wherever that means we are.”

“Tenchi.” Ryoko’s eyes softened, and Tenchi scratched his head awkwardly.

“I’ve something to show you.” He added, getting to his feet and moving over to his desk, rummaging in the drawer as he hunted through his papers for a particular item. “It was actually Dad who put the idea into my head... and when I thought about it, I realised that he was right. Sometimes we talk at cross-purposes. We come from different worlds, and we have different experiences in life from which we’ve developed different ways of handling situations. But even despite that, I love you and I want you to know that it doesn’t matter to me what you’ve done in the past. Or where you’ve been. Where you were born. Any of that. So long as right now you’re with me — that matters more.”

He pulled a red-covered sketchbook from the bottom of the drawer, flicking it open and then holding it out to her.

“Dad said that if you saw this, you might understand that more clearly.” He added self-consciously. “Because sometimes pictures speak louder than words. You know that I love to draw — and I love to draw the things that are important in my life. But I’ve never shown you... these before. And... I want to. Now.”

“All right.” Ryoko frowned, taking the book, and glancing at it. Her eyes widened, and she glanced up at him, startled.

“But... you... this is...”

“It’s you.” Tenchi agreed awkwardly, sitting down beside her. “I’ve always drawn you... ever since I discovered how much I loved to draw. You should know that — it’s one of the few things that I remember from Haruna’s world. That I drew someone who was always with me, no matter what I could remember or where I was. Drawing you seems to inspire me like nothing else... drawing you helped to bring my true memories back in that world, and in this one, it’s always been...”

He hesitated, debating the best words to choose. At length he sighed.

“I’m not great with words and I get embarrassed and flustered easily when it comes to these things.” He admitted ruefully. “So maybe I don’t always say the right things. And I don’t always understand how to tell you how I feel, either. But... I wanted you to

see these... because I thought... it would say it more clearly than anything else... how much I love you.”

Ryoko’s eyes glittered with tears, and slowly she turned the pages, absorbing each image in silence. At length, she reached the final picture, and she bit her lip, pressing her finger to the page.

“Ryoko and Tenchi.” She murmured softly, brushing her finger against the image gently. “Together.”

“Married.” Tenchi agreed quietly. “If... that’s still what you want, after all of this. It’s still what I want.”

He gestured to the picture, shrugging.

“So I drew that just on a whim, but if you don’t want to marry me in a traditionally Japanese way, you don’t have to.” He added. “In the end, it doesn’t matter to me how we do it. So long... so long as we do. Where isn’t important either. I just think... it’s time we stopped messing around. And... just did it.”

“That sounds more like my philosophy than yours.” Carefully Ryoko shut the sketchbook, setting it aside as she looped her arms around his neck. “And it’s a silly, moot question, Tenchi-kun. I was mad at you, but I was mad at me, too. For being a pirate and causing you so much trouble. But Sakura said that you caused as much of it yourself, by being who you were. And now the cat is out of the bag big time it’s as you said — it doesn’t matter. If you’re okay with being outed, well, I’m okay with being the wife of the man who saved the world from destruction.”

She dimpled, mischief flickering in her amber eyes.

“I’m very photogenic.” She added. “I’m sure that I’ll look just fine in all the celebrity columns and glossy magazines, hanging on your arm like the beautiful maiden I am.”

Tenchi stared at her for a moment, then he burst out laughing, hugging her tightly.

“That’s why I love you.” He admitted. “When you say things like that. You’re unique, Ryoko, beyond all levels of uniqueness. But I wouldn’t be without you. Not now.”

“Then it’s settled.” Ryoko disentangled herself, resting her hands on his shoulders, and Tenchi could see the stirring emotion in her golden gaze.

“We’ll get married.” She said softly. “And we’ll do it here, Tenchi. This is where you belong. This planet. And I belong with you. Just like

I've always said. Besides, I haven't given up on the Earth yet. It's had a rough baptism into the world of aliens, but it's not been entirely their fault. And I... I don't want to be running again. I don't want to always be on the move. This is where we've got roots, and we should stick it out. Both of us."

She shrugged.

"Remember, Sakura would kill me if I didn't have her at my wedding." She added. "She did take me in, when I was a lost stray. I owe her that, at the very least."

"I suppose." Tenchi grinned. "Okay. If that's what you want, it's what we'll do."

"It's what I want." Ryoko agreed. "Though you're right in one respect."

"Which is?"

"We aren't an average, conventional couple... so we shouldn't have to conform to other people's ideas of a proper wedding." Ryoko's lips twitched into a wicked smile. "We're not like everyone else. We do things our own way. This should be the same. Let's have our wedding our way. Okay? A pirate and a prince don't get married every day of the week, after all. Let's make it something to remember."

"Ryoko-chan, so long as you're there, I don't think it could ever be anything else." Tenchi said ruefully, and Ryoko swiped at him playfully.

"Be nice." She warned. "Otherwise I might take advantage of you in this physically weakened state, and who knows what might happen?"

"Oh, shut up." Despite himself, Tenchi laughed, slipping his arms more securely around her as he kissed her gently on the lips. "One of these days I'll take you up on one of those threats, and then we'll see who has the last laugh."

"That sounds like a promise." Ryoko leant up against him, meeting his gaze with challenging amber eyes. "All right, Prince of Jurai. Then it's settled. We'll get married, and then I'm going to make sure we have one hell of a honeymoon. And I mean one *hell* of one. But be warned — noone's ever gotten the better of the Space Pirate Ryoko yet."

"There's always a first time." Tenchi touched her cheek gently. "I think I can handle it. After all, I've got you for keeps, haven't I? And I'm not letting you go this time. So throw what you like at me... you

won't scare me away."

"Well, I always like a challenge." Ryoko said contentedly, and Tenchi felt her fingers slip through his once more, squeezing them tightly. "If that's how you want it, Tenchi-kun... you're on. After all, as I've said before — life with me can be hell-raising, chaotic and unpredictable. But one thing it will never, ever be... is dull!"

"Nii-chan?"

Seiryō opened his eyes, meeting two curious, expectant blue eyes as he struggled into a sitting position, casting his companion a rueful smile.

"Morning, Tokimi." He said playfully. "What's with the wake-up call — were you worried about me?"

"Nii-chan was late back last night." Tokimi admitted. "Tokimi thought... maybe Nii-chan wasn't coming home at all."

"I'm sorry." Seiryō looked contrite. "You know I was helping out some Galaxy Police friends. And Kiyone, too. She was in a spot of trouble... I had to get her out of it."

He fingered his arm, wincing involuntarily as he found the bruise from the previous night's struggle, and at his expression, Tokimi frowned.

"Nii-chan is hurt?" She asked softly, reaching out to take his arm in hers. Gently she rolled back his sleeve, running her fingers tentatively over the limb. "Nii-chan was fighting last night?"

"Sort of." Seiryō agreed ruefully. "Yes, I suppose so."

"With Kiyone?"

"No, not Kiyone." Seiryō laughed, shaking his head. "At least, not this kind of fight. No. This was a battle of swords and wits and in the end, I won. Don't worry, Tokimi. They're just bruises. I'm fine. Really."

"Nii-chan." Tokimi looked reproachful, setting his arm down, and Seiryō eyed her quizzically.

"What?"

"Nii-chan... killed someone last night."

"Dammit, you see way too much with that sight of yours, Toki-chan." Seiryō said wryly, rolling down his sleeve as he shrugged his

shoulders. "It wasn't quite like that. He had his sword at my throat. I didn't want to — but if I hadn't, he would've killed me, Kiyone and then all the people on planet Earth, if he'd had half a chance. I was defending her, defending them — and making sure I stayed alive. You worried that I was late back — what if I'd not come home at all?"

"He was... bad man?" Tokimi looked doubtful.

"You can ask Kiyone, next time you see her." Seiryō responded evenly. "He meant business. I promise, Toki-chan, I didn't go after killing him. I was going to immobilise him and restrain him so Imaguchi and Takamura could place him under official arrest — but he had other ideas. He was half crazy... I swear, that's what happened."

"Nii-chan... won't be in trouble?"

"No. It's all all right. I promise." Seiryō touched her cheek. "Don't look like that. I swear... it's all okay. But we don't need to tell Suki, all right? As far as she knows, my police work is behind me and over, and I don't think she'd understand."

"All right." Tokimi sighed, then nodded her head. "Tokimi won't tell. But Nii-chan is really not hurt? And Kiyone — he didn't hurt her, either?"

"No, believe me, she's full of life." Seiryō said ruefully. "You needn't worry about her, either."

Tokimi nodded, sitting down on the bedcovers as she regarded her companion with a searching, interested look.

"Nii-chan seems... different today." She decided absently, and Seiryō eyed her in confusion.

"Different?" He asked. "Because of the fight? Toki-chan..."

"No." Tokimi shook her head, slipping her fingers into her adoptive brother's and squeezing them tightly. "Nii-chan's pain... is fading. Nii-chan... is feeling better. Smiling. Laughing. Happy again. Is Nii-chan... all right, now?"

"I guess it seems odd to you, that I'd be this way after killing someone in armed combat." Seiryō rubbed his chin. "And it's the first person I've taken down since I left the Galaxy Police. Since I started to feel differently about things, Tokimi — since you and I both were changed forever by Kii magic. But I haven't really even bothered about him — about what happened, not really. I was angry with him because he hurt Kiyone, and because he wanted to kill so many

innocent people on the Earth. I guess because of that, I can't feel too sorry he's dead. So I suppose that I am all right. Yes. I think so."

"And Kaede-sama?" Tokimi murmured softly. "Has Nii-chan let her go with peace, now?"

"Yes." Seiryō became grave. "It's about time I did, huh? Poor Mother. She suffered so much, and I couldn't even be unselfish enough to let her go. But I have to, don't I? She's gone. And it's the duty of the child to honour and respect their parents... at least with her, I can do that. I loved her a lot, and I'll miss her badly. But it's what Suki's said — she's not in pain any more. And she let go because she knew we'd be all right without her. This morning, I do feel like I am... all right. Like I'll come to terms with it, bit by bit."

"Tokimi is glad." Tokimi beamed. "Tokimi doesn't like Nii-chan in pain."

"Nii-chan doesn't like it either." Seiryō said ruefully. "So I'm glad too. Today, I'll go to the shrine and I'll say a prayer, for her sake. Even if I'm dubious in that department, I think... for her... I can do it. Just this once. To let her know — if there is somewhere she is, now — that she needn't worry about any of us any more. I'm Lord of this manor and I can be that without her, now. So I'll do that. I feel it's right."

Tokimi leant up against her companion, raising sapphire eyes to his as she digested his words.

"Nii-chan told Kiyo-neesan, too?" She asked softly, and Seiryō started, gazing down at her guiltily.

"Toki-chan..."

"Nii-chan did." Tokimi's expression became one of satisfaction, and she nodded approvingly. "Nii-chan told Kiyone he loved her. Yes? Nii-chan did?"

"Sometimes I wish I wasn't such an open book to you." Seiryō rubbed his temples, slowly nodding his head. "Yes. I did."

"And Kiyo-neesan loves Nii-chan too, yes?"

"Tokimi, if you knew that before, why the hell didn't you tell me?" Seiryō demanded sharply, and Tokimi giggled at his expression, shaking her head unrepentantly.

"Nii-chan said to Tokimi not to talk about it." She said innocently. "Besides, is not Tokimi's job. Is Nii-chan and Kiyo-neesan's. Tokimi can't. Nii-chan must say what's in Nii-chan's heart. Otherwise it isn't meaning anything. Is it?"

“Tokimi.” Seiryō sighed heavily. ‘You know, sometimes I think I’m looking after you, and then other times I think you’re smarter than the lot of us, and you’re the one doing the looking after. Which is it, huh? Am I really ‘Nii-chan’ to you, or are you turning into my “Oneesan” now, too?”

“Tokimi can be Nii-chan’s Nee-chan.” Tokimi dimpled. “If Nii-chan likes.”

“I’m not sure that works, you know...”

“Yes it does.” Tokimi tilted her head, eying him playfully. “Tokimi can. If she wants.”

“I suppose you are older than me.” Seiryō acknowledged. “But... sometimes, I swear... Toki-chan, you’ve sat and watched Kiyone and I dancing around each other, haven’t you? We must seem like idiots to you, if it’s been that obvious from the start.”

“Love is difficult.” Tokimi said pensively, and for an instant Seiryō had the impression his companion was in full possession of all of her faculties. “It can hurt a lot, Tokimi knows this. And it shouldn’t be interfered with by other people. Not by Tokimi, or Suki, or Sasami, or anyone else. Nii-chan understands?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Seiryō admitted. “I suppose it is better this way.”

“And now Nii-chan will be with Kiyo-neesan?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. It’s a little complicated, considering how busy we both are, and how separate our lives are.” Seiryō admitted. “And there’s the matter of Jurai’s social system, too. Kiyone’s determined we shouldn’t be telling anyone anything — me, I don’t care, overly. I’ve got to the point where I’ve done fighting it. If life is as short as it is, I want to have all the things to make it happy as much as I can. But if that’s how she feels, I won’t overrule her. Still...”

“Is a secret?” Tokimi’s eyes widened. “But Nii-chan told Tokimi!”

“Nii-chan trusts Tokimi to keep secrets.” Seiryō eyed her dryly. “Truth is, there’s not much I can keep from you anyway. And for some reason, I find it easier to talk to you than anyone about things like this — maybe it’s because of that. I don’t feel I’m breaking my silence, if you can already see how I’m feeling before I say anything. But you’re also a good listener, Toki-chan... I think in some ways you understand me better than even Suki does, some days.”

“Tokimi and Nii-chan are connected.” Tokimi decided. “So Tokimi

understands Nii-chan. And Nii-chan understands Tokimi. Besides...”

She paused, biting her lip, and Seiryō was startled to see a wistful look touch her sapphire eyes.

“Love is important.” She murmured. “Is stronger than anything. Even than Tsunami. Is the most important thing of everything. And Tokimi... Tokimi wants Nii-chan to be happy. Suki too. Nii-chan and Suki are so good to Tokimi, and look after her... like family, now. So Tokimi wants happiness for both of you. Very, very much. If Nii-chan and Suki are happy, Tokimi is happy too.”

“Tokimi...”

“Tokimi won’t get married, or fall in love.” Tokimi continued quietly. “Will she?”

“I... I don’t know.” Seiryō admitted. “It’s not something I can answer, Tokimi — that lies with you.”

“No...” Tokimi shook her head. “Tokimi is... different now. Maybe once... once, Tokimi might have... but not now.”

She paused, then shrugged.

“But it’s okay.” She added. “Tokimi is happy. Tokimi has people who love her, and she will stay with them, always. But if Nii-chan can have it, and Suki too, they should. And Tokimi likes Kiyo-neechan. Tokimi has faith... Seiryō and Kiyo-neesan will be happy. Tokimi is sure of that.”

“Oh, Toki-chan.” Seiryō sighed, then hugged the slight figure tightly, shaking his head.

“I never realised you thought about things like that, in terms of your own life.” He murmured. “I’m sorry. It was dense of me. I suppose I should have done.”

“Tokimi is like Washu.” Tokimi shook her head. “The past means we are alone. We are Kii, but there is no Kihaku. No Eagle. Washu... Washu said she had someone, but he died, and she still loves him, but she can’t marry a dead person. And Tokimi... Tokimi is broken. Mihoshi-san said it, when we were on Rikishouki. Tokimi is different now. And so... Tokimi can’t be married. Tokimi can’t... have children or family. So Tokimi... will help Nii-chan and Suki instead.”

“Tokimi, you’re not broken. And you will always have family, no matter what.” Seiryō held her at arm’s length, offering her a smile. “Whether you marry, whether you can or can’t have children, whether all the things you say are true. You’ll always be part of *my* family. If

things pan out with Kiyone or if they don't — right now, it's a milestone in itself, and I wouldn't like to even guess where it's going or if it's going anywhere. But if, one day, I marry, and have children of my own, it won't ever mean you won't be as important to me as you are now. And you'll always have a home here. You'll be part of my family, just like you are now. Okay?"

Tokimi eyed him for a moment, tears glittering faintly in her unusual, expressive eyes. Then she flung her arms around him, almost knocking him backwards as she nodded her head.

"Woah!" He laughed, returning the hug with another warm embrace of his own. "All right, calm down. You should know that, anyway. This is where you belong. We don't mind if you're different now, Tokimi. You're just as important now as you were before Kihaku hurt you, you know. Never ever feel that you're not. You have no idea how much you've done for me, just being here... or maybe you do, I don't know. But I wouldn't change anything that's happened. Mother's death taught me more than ever that family is important to me. And Suki and you are my family, now. So I'm glad you're on my side."

"Maybe Nii-chan will marry Kiyo-neesan." Tokimi suggested, and Seiryō grinned ruefully.

"It's far too early to make such suggestions." He said ironically. "Let's take it one step at a time, shall we? I'm not used to being in love with anyone. I've well and truly lost my battle against my emotions, and I didn't expect her to feel the same way. But she does, and now I'm in new territory. I thought I was in love once, as a teenager, but it wasn't really love — I know that now. I've been involved with women before, but I've never felt so... tentative and vulnerable as this. So we'll see where it goes. I may need your help, to figure out my own feelings from time to time."

"Tokimi promises." Tokimi nodded.

"And you won't tell anyone what I've told you? Any of it? Not even Suki or Sasami-sama?"

"Tokimi won't." Tokimi agreed. "Because Nii-chan asked. Is a special secret for Tokimi and Nii-chan and Kiyo-neesan. Yes?"

"Yes." Seiryō agreed. "And that said, you'd better go get up... and so had I. I have to report to the palace this morning, regardless of how late I got back or how little sleep I've had. Kiyone and I talked for a long time last night — that's why I didn't get home till the time I did. But life goes on — work beckons. And I'm all right now. I've neglected my duties with Princess Sasami and the council, but I'll make up for

that now everything is set to rights.”

Tokimi nodded, shuffling off his bed and making her way to the door. Once there, she paused, sending him a wide, excited smile.

“Nii-chan glows.” She said softly. “Tokimi likes it. Nii-chan isn’t alone any more... Tokimi is happy, because so is Nii-chan. Stay happy, Nii-chan. Trust your heart... Tokimi knows it’s right.”

Then she was gone, and Seiryō sighed, pushing back the covers and getting slowly to his feet as he moved to glance at his reflection in the mirror pool. Even though he lacked Tokimi’s piercing Kii sight, he could see himself that some of the strain and preoccupation had gone from his expression and, although his lack of sleep was visible, it was not the weariness of someone who was forcing himself through the days.

“I hope Mother understands what Kiyone means to me, and can accept it.” He murmured, reaching down to disperse the image with his finger. “And that in a way, she’s brought us together. That losing her made me realise what it means to lose someone you love... and that I wasn’t going to let Nakabito take Kiyone from me, too. Telling her was a gamble, but I’m glad I took it. Now I can move forwards again, I think... as Tokimi said, I’m not alone any more. Frightening and new it might be, and full of risks and problems. But even so... even so...”

He paused, smiling slightly as he remembered their conversation the night before.

“Even so, we’ll fight together.” He mused. “And maybe Tokimi will be proven right again. Maybe there is something in it... after all, the world does move in mysterious ways. Even for Lords of Jurai and Detectives of the Galaxy Police — who am I to question the turn of fate?”

Operation Eradicate: Part Two

::The End::

End Note (Warning, random Vraie story babble included!)

My thanks again to everyone who’s followed my little adventure of characters from Dark Heart to this point. You all deserve cookies. Many, many cookies. Sasami, get cooking!)

For all the Seiryō x Kiyone fans that have sprung up out of the woodwork since Demon’s Exile, I hope you’re satisfied . I suspect some will be thinking, “But can they make it work...?” That’s easy to answer. Hell,

it's fanfiction. Of course they can make it work!

For all the Tenchi x Ryoko fans — you might not be entirely satisfied by the ending from a romance perspective, but such is life — there are a few rules I made for myself before I began writing Tenchific and so in order to obey them, I've decided to end it this way. I never intended to write Ryoko and Tenchi getting married, but I did begin to think I might wind up doing it. But in the end I'm content that I didn't. It's fairly obvious that they will be together, anyway. You can imagine the wedding any way you like...

such is the power of imagination, huh? And more than anything, I think Tenchi saving the Earth is a much better ending. As Shin Tenchi Muyo puts forward — Tenchi is the Earth's protector. And that is, maybe, why he has Tsunami's power after all. At long last, he's learnt to properly use it to protect his planet. ;)

I will say that there is someone important in Tenchi and Ryoko's future, just as there is in Ayeka's. If you've visited my website, you'll know what I mean. And for anyone who hasn't — take into account the "Dying Tree" and the picture on my profile page... although I haven't decided whether or not to ever write the epilogue story properly, there should probably be a footnote here for the future existence of **Nozomi Masaki Jurai**. (So here it is. One footnote.LOL).

For Sasami's fans — Sasami has come a lot further than I thought she would when I began. I sort of feel she's ready to take things on, now, as Tsunami. Will she ever tell Kamidake how she feels, however? Guess that's another one left open to reader opinion. But I am happy about how strong Sasami has become. Jurai will be in safe hands with her behind the scenes, I'm sure of it!

For Ayeka, the future of Jurai I think would now be the focus of her attention. Though she will always love Tenchi, I think, at last, she's accepted that he and she won't be together, and she is content. With the birth of her son and heir, Jurai's rocky inheritance is set in stone at last. I never like writing "having a baby" stories, but I thought it was important to show Ayeka in this light for this story. That she has accepted her future and that one day she will be a great woman in many regards — as an Empress, a wife, a sister and, most important of all, as a mother. Ayeka has a lot of love to give, and I wanted to give her someone in whom she could fully invest that love. I think that, through the baby, her and Takeru's relationship is cemented at last.

For those curious enough to wonder, the Prince's name is Shigure. **Shigure Imada Jurai**. Anyone who's read "After The Rain" will know that he's named after the Emperor who martyred himself against Kain in my continuity — Azusa and Haru's father and Ayeka's imposing, intimidating

grandfather. (And there is a picture of young Prince Shigure on my website, if anyone is curious enough to see!)

For Washu, Yume and everyone else, life goes on. Tokimi never did get to meet Zakari (“Z”), and discover that she was a mother, after all. I’d like to think that somehow, eventually, she would meet him... but the story premise to do it did not seem right. Still, her connections to the Tennan family remain as strong as ever — this is her home and always will be.

Tokimi has a special soft spot in my heart now, even though she’s wound up not much like her OVA counterpart. People have probably guessed that her latter incarnation was inspired somewhat by chibi-Tokimi in episode 20, but if not, now you know.

There was another more personal motivation behind it too, however. I wanted a character who was perceived as being “impaired” yet one who was powerful despite that impairment. (Raising the question, is one really impaired if one can live their life to the fullest regardless?) That was important to me to do — call it a bit of individual fightback against the stereotypes in real-life society that people place on the things they don’t understand.

In a sense, this whole story was focused on the inner self over the outer appearance — that people aren’t always what they seem to be. Tokimi is the epitome of that in so many ways. Her perception of the world is unique, but as beautiful and resonant as any of the other characters’...at least, I hope that’s the Tokimi that I managed to get across.

In terms of other things, Suki Tennan will probably never be arraigned for the crime of her father’s death — especially with Sasami and Takeru both looking out for her along with Seiryō and Washu. However her involvement with the Galaxy Police — and specifically, the Elite Division — is far from at an end. Even though I didn’t have the opportunity to properly explore that fact in this story (gomen) .

For all the people who wanted me to write more about the Earthlings — I trust I’ve covered that enough with this story. You can draw your own conclusions about Sakura and Hiroshi — I have no decisions either way as to whether or not they’ll get together, so it’s up to the reader what they think. As for Kane, I imagine Tenchi would forgive him in the long run. And I think, for Kane himself, he might just re-evaluate his opinion of alien life after this little incident!

Again, thank you to everyone. I’ve no doubt I’ll keep writing, even if it’s not Tenchi fic... so maybe I’ll write something else worth reading in the not so distant future ;) You never know, ne:)

In final conclusion, I hope it’s been as fun a journey for you as it has for

me!

本当にありがとうございました！
Hontou ni arigatou gozaimashita!

VraieEsprit